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ABSTRACT

This special journal issue consists of 14 articles by outstanding teachers explaining what they do to get their students to write effective stories and essays. The issue's introduction discusses a study of similarities in techniques among successful writing teachers. The second section, "Writing Approaches, Ideas and Assignments," contains six articles covering such subjects as writing workshops, warmup exercises for writing short stories, and a process for teaching detail. The four articles in the third section, "Classroom Environment and Teacher Philosophy: An Overview," report on the beliefs and specific practices of successful writing teachers and programs. The final section, "Learning from Students," contains three articles that reveal how teachers have improved their teaching and their knowledge simply by appreciating the wisdom of their pupils. (JL)

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ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Producing Award-Winning Student Writers: Tips From Successful Teachers

Fall 1982

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PRODUCING AWARD-WINNING STUDENT WRITERS

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ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Vol. 70, No. 1 **Urbana, Illinois** **Fall, 1982**

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

The enthusiastic reception which greeted the Spring 1981 issue of *The Illinois English Bulletin*, "Producing Award-Winning Student Poets: Tips from Successful Teachers," motivated the planning of this sequel devoted to prose. Again, Illinois teachers whose students have consistently been given recognition through awards and publication were asked to share their procedures and ideas—this time, for getting young people to write effective stories and essays.

Serving as an introduction is a study of the similarities in technique George Seidenbecker has found among teachers with outstanding student representation in the *Bulletin*'s annual publication of the year's best prose. By giving close attention to a sampling of their methods, he has been able to identify with precision certain common factors.

The first section of essays describes classroom te[illegible] approaches and assignments. The next four articles provide an overvie[illegible] of ideas and their implementation in both small town and large suburban schools. Writers in the final section give special consideration to the student as receiver and as teacher in the writing process.

I am proud that the *Bulletin* can honor the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English through the publication of this issue since it symbolizes in practical form the expertise and dedication of the English teachers of this state.

DOROTHY MATTHEWS
Editor

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Techniques Used by Illinois Teachers of Published Students: A Study of Similarities

GEORGE SEIDENBECKER
EVANSTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

Like most high school English teachers, part of my job has been teaching both expository and imaginative writing, and, over the years, I have developed a special interest in how to encourage students to write good imaginative prose. After talking to my own students about what led them to produce arresting pieces, I finally took my questions about composing to other teachers and to some of their students. I interviewed the five teachers who, from 1972 to 1981, have had works by their high school students published most often in the annual "best Illinois prose" issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*. (Most of the works published here seem to be imaginative prose where fact and fiction are blended freely.)

These five teachers are Alva Lowey, Lake Forest High School, who has taught nine published students; myself, Evanston Township High School (ETHS), six students; Mary Penson, DeKalb High School, five; John Reque, ETHS, five; and Curtis Crotty, ETHS, four. I shall refer to this group of teachers of four or more published students as often-published teachers.

I also interviewed the four teachers of high school students whose work was published in the *Bulletin* during the late spring of 1981. They are Ellen Bronkema, Bolingbrook High School, Kenneth Nelson, Rockford Guilford High School, Reque, and Lowey. I shall refer to Bronkema and Nelson together as once-published teachers, and I shall refer to all seven as published teachers. These seven have taught twenty-nine of the ninety-two high school students whose work has been published during the ten years. (To support some of my generalizations I shall refer to some of the works of these twenty-nine students.)

In the interview I asked each of them about the conditions leading to and following the writing of each published piece, about the student who wrote the piece, and about their development as teachers of imaginative writing. Their comments and those of the four high school students published in 1981, whom I also interviewed, reveal similarities in some of the conditions surrounding the production of published pieces and similarities in the way the teachers assign and evaluate works.

Before they present students with the assignment that eventually leads to publication, most of the teachers provide pre-writing activi-

ties consisting of lessons, models, warm-up activities, or a combination of these. First, most of the teachers either teach a specific form that students can use or they presume that students are familiar with it as a prerequisite for their course. Most frequently this form is that of a short story with a plot based on conflict between characters and developed through dramatized scenes. The published teachers, however, usually seem willing to accept writing regardless of whether it fulfills a certain form and observes the other constraints that they may establish for an assignment.

Before students write their assignments, almost all of the teachers provide them with models written by professional writers, other students, or both. They seem to present the models as examples of how one person treats an idea or solves a problem, as suggestions of possibilities rather than as limits in topic or form. Lowey has back issues of her school's literary magazine available in her classroom and reads selections from them to illustrate techniques being discussed in current compositions. Her student, Mary Salter, preferred these student models to professional ones, which Lowey also provided, because "they're more approachable."

To encourage fluency among students Penson, Lowey, and I also use warm-up techniques like writing fables or parodies, journal writing, or free-writing or free-talking about whatever is on students' minds.

The range of personal material among the published pieces suggests that students are at ease with their teachers and trust them. For example, Frier McCallister writes of a recent visit to his ancestral home, Pauline Kurtides writes of her fear that a patrol boy would report a misdeed to her parents, Kathe Telingator writes of her difficulty judging her sister and friends in a dance audition for a select company, Susan Abplanalp writes of the changing relationship between her brother and her father, and Sally Hakala writes of her grandfather's death. Whatever their teachers do in their classes to win enough of their students' confidence so they will share experiences significant to them is perhaps the most important warm-up activity.

Another similarity in the conditions surrounding the production of the twenty-nine published pieces is in the various assignments given by the seven teachers. Students could select whatever they wanted to write about without restriction on most of the assignments given by Bronkema, Nelson, Penson (during the second semester of her two-semester sequence for creative writing), Reque, and me. If not completely open, topics were so open that a student could select a subject within a wide category of general topics (apparently designed by teachers to help students narrow their focus); for example, one topic that Reque typed on his "creative

writing" assignment in 1980 was "Write a story in which an expected or commonplace relationship is reversed." Choosing the actual relationship to describe for this topic is entirely up to the student. Reque further widened possible subjects by giving six more similarly open topics. Crotty, Lowey, and I have also assigned categories in which students have latitude in selecting particular experiences to write about. For example, Crotty used a topic like the following: "Write some personal reminiscences about yourself and your grandparents. Focus on a particular moment, a particular time and place. And do as much as you can to characterize yourself and your grandparents at that moment." Lowey has assigned a retrospective narrative: an incident from childhood whose full significance was not realized by a character as it occurred. I have assigned an autobiographical or biographical narrative which, among other possibilities, can be a development of a catchy anecdote about a living or dead member of the writer's family.

The published teachers encourage students to write from their own experience and knowledge. Even in her highly structured assignment for a detail-essay, Bronkema instructs her students to write what they know. When students are given open topics, sometimes, as in the pieces by Donna Shibovich and David Jones, the subject comes from the current preoccupations of their imaginations. Often, even these imaginings will be unrecognized shadows of their authors' own personalities. Penson, for example, finds that when she asks her students to fabricate a character so they know this person well, they often write about themselves because they know themselves best. I read two of the protagonists in my students' published works as projections of some aspect of their authors' personalities, as alter egos doing deeds their authors, consciously or unconsciously, wish or fear; and I read three other works as almost entirely literal autobiography. All of the often-published teachers encourage their students to write directly from experience because when students do this they have, to use Reque's words, "a better grip on their material." He goes on to assess the effect this grip has on student's writing: "The authenticity of plot, characterization, and so forth is likely to be more persuasive." Lowey, too, encourages students to use autobiographical material, but she finds that if it is recent material students are too involved in it to handle it skillfully, so she often encourages them to reflect on their childhoods. Crotty thinks that all four of the published pieces by his students are autobiographical.

Besides their similarity in openness and autobiographical orientation, the assignments of published teachers are similar in their time constraints. For three out of four of the high school works published

in 1981, the students were given between one and two weeks to write their compositions. (The fourth student was given a month.) The student writers used this time for thinking and revising, writing and revising, or talking to their parents about how to do the assignment or about the quality of a rough draft. In giving deadlines and in spacing assignments, the two often-published teachers of creative writing seem to allow time for students to absorb an assignment and to think about it. They seem to recognize that sometimes students may not consciously carry out these operations. For example, Penson suspects that ideas she had introduced to Phil McGrath about character development "lay dormant" in his mind until he used them in "Teaching the Illiterate." Although Lowey says that students should be kept busy, she also says they need time for ideas to "simmer." This seems to have dramatically happened this year. The actual germ for two of the imaginative compositions came to their writers before the assignment was actually given: Mary Salter had written about her topic in a different form three years earlier, and David Jones had been struggling with his idea about art for months.

On the other hand, a week may also give time for inspiration to strike, as it did Donna Shibovich the day her assignment was given on the way from school. Shibovich used much of her remaining time just to write out, in three or four separate sessions, the theory that had come to her whole. A week or two also gives time for methodically exploring possibilities. For segments of the two weeks she was allowed for the assignment, Christiansen was engaged in discussing the assignment with her mother, selecting a topic, writing a rough draft, writing a revised draft, and producing a final copy. With less time, Christiansen's topic, its development, or both, would probably have been less interesting. Two students (Salter and Jones) actually waited until the night before their assignments were due before committing their ideas to paper and revising them. Even in these cases, however, the students seemed to use the time allowed productively to consider how they would do the assignment.

As one would expect, the assignments, even those of a single teacher, for which students wrote published works vary somewhat in constraints of form and length. For her essay, Bronkema specified what each of the five paragraphs was to contain in detail, for example, "an introductory statement . . . had to be developed through example, or rhetorical question, or quotes, or statistics." Reque, too, recalls being quite specific in prescribing the form for the only expository assignment—a research paper—among the published pieces by his students. Published teachers have also specified form for some of the imaginative writing. Nelson and, recently,

Reque and I have asked (but apparently did not strictly require) students to follow a traditional narrative development (with conflict, rising action, and climax) to about fifteen hundred words. Lowey, in her one-semester creative writing course, and Penson, in the first of her two, sequential creative writing courses, have specified form (and focus) in assigning things like a character short story, a philosophical short story, a short story occurring during a short time, and a retrospective narrative. Lowey sets the length of her assignments at about fifteen hundred words; Penson instructs her students to make a composition "as long as it needs to tell the story." Instead of form, Crotty's assignments constrain style: early in the year he gives and explains to his advanced placement students a list of the "ten elements of a mature style," like "deliberate use of semi-colon, colon, and dash . . . deliberate variety in sentence length," and he grades papers on their inclusion of these elements. Crotty usually leaves the decision about the appropriate length for a composition up to its author. (Occasionally, he suggests probable length.)

Even though three of the four students published this year claimed to write primarily for themselves, all of them were also interested in how their work was received by others, parents, and, especially, teachers. Both Christiansen and Shibovich sought from others extensive reactions to works that would eventually be published. Christiansen wrote to gain her mother's approval during each step in her composing. Shibovich shared her piece with her mother, the Bolingbrook Writer's Club, and others. Most of the published teachers arranged classes to serve as audiences or they themselves served as audiences for their students' imaginative prose.

Students of the often-published teachers shared most of the published compositions with other students in their classes. (Of the often-published teachers, it appears that Reque alone did not have any published students read their works to their classes.) Crotty let students read works aloud to classmates if they wanted to. He finds that his advanced placement students are usually confident enough to do so. Through this oral sharing, students may see, according to Crotty, the strong effect their writing can have on others, as, he suggests Anne Lowrey did when she read her, then yet to be published, "Sniff" and her classmates applauded. Lowey's students often read their writings to their entire classes or pass them to a small group of friends or confidants to get positive and negative reactions. Early in the term Lowey trains her creative writing classes to evaluate papers by reading model responses written by the student editors of the literary magazine, which she sponsors, and by raising questions herself after students read their works. Penson uses the

entire class in evaluating anonymously read compositions, but in an even more systematic way than Lowey. She relies almost entirely on the class for critical evaluations of all works after they are read aloud—when a student approaches her before class for her reaction to his work, she usually tells him to wait because she gives it as one participant in the group. Like Lowey, Penson trains her students to react to papers by leading them at first. After that she takes a position subordinate to students. She monitors the sessions so reactions to papers maintain a balance of positive reactions and recommendations for revision. (When a student cruelly reacts to another's work, she privately tells the critic to stop to avoid intimidating or inhibiting others.) In her class, evaluation of a single composition may be as brief as ten minutes or as long as three class sessions; the class may react to general qualities of the work, to a few details, or they may even analyze it line by line. Lowey and Penson respect the general critical opinions of these groups to the extent that they do not press their dissenting opinions in opposition to that of the group. (On the other hand, both women leave to the author the decision of whether or not to use any of the suggestions in revising a work.)

I, too, have asked groups of students to form audiences for each other's work, often employing a format modeled after that described by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*. My sophomore students, however, seem to find it difficult to observe strictly Elbow's steps of reading, recalling, summarizing, describing feelings as the work was read, and offering some non-literal association suggested by the work. Instead my writers and their audiences tend to discuss works almost like gossip (Here's what that girl's doing now!), to expand the events (What did you do next?), to explore common backgrounds (I went to Nichols School too!), to get to know the author (How did you feel then?), and to swap stories (That also happened to me).

The group audience may raise some questions about unclear passages or other problems with words, but even if they do, I, apparently unlike Penson with her juniors and seniors and Lowey with her seniors, think the groups provide my sophomores with neither much critical information for close revision nor much greater sensitivity to narrative and other writing techniques. I see their primary value not in helping students analyze what they have written nor in helping students acquire specific skills but in helping students feel comfortable telling others about what they see, what they do, or what they think. In my judgment, students in groups usually go beyond merely polite, superficial reception of each other's writing to show an interest in each other and in each other's experi-

ences and ideas, and, I hope, this interest gives some students a sense of the range of material they can write about and a reason to write and to share some of it. I think that groups may have value as a warm-up technique in perhaps the most important step in writing: selecting a good subject. If groups convey to writers only the impression that they can write about almost anything important to them, they serve a worthwhile purpose. If groups also convey to writers the impression that others may be interested in what they are interested in, or in their writing, so much the better.

Besides often having offered student writers an audience of peers that may give critical, as well as other, responses to their works, often-published teachers themselves frequently served or made themselves available as a critical audience, and students seemed eager to win their approval. David Jones, for example, seemed to esteem Reque and submitted both expository and imaginative compositions to him to verify his own high opinion of his work. Teachers may respond to a work as the student works on an original draft, a revision of an original draft (often for publication), or both. Crotty allows a couple of days before a writing assignment is due for conferences with students about it in class; Penson joins her classes in critiquing works and has conferences with writers who have problems; Reque and I give reactions in writing and, sometimes, in conference; and Lowey responds to works in writing, in class discussions (if they occur), and, sometimes, in informal conferences. A teacher's reaction may, on occasion, lead a student to extensive revision—one of Lowey's suggestions to Mary Salter led her to rewrite her whole story to change the first person narrator to a third person narrator, which she later discarded as unsuccessful—but in most cases it appears that students are neither asked to nor do they revise more than occasional details, problem passages, and, in a few cases, mechanical errors.

When often-published teachers make recommendations for revisions, they are usually limited to specific words or passages in the text; for example, Reque suggested that Jones imply rather than state Picasso's identity, and Penson and her group probably expressed the objection that some ideas Phil McGrath had a little girl express seemed beyond her age. These and other recommendations by often-published teachers indicate they are sensitive to details and ideas, but in most cases the revisions themselves do not seem of much consequence in terms of the whole work. What the teachers' suggestions probably indicate to students is that the teachers hold high expectations and that they are willing to read their works carefully; in short, that the teacher is a fitting audience for a work produced with serious effort.

I suspect, therefore, that the most important effect of a teacher's critical reactions occurs, in most cases, as a condition for composing not as a condition for revision. Perhaps teachers' reactions are carried by students from one assignment to the next, as the students in Janet Emig's study of *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* carried and attempted to apply their former teachers' general prescriptions (such as one student did when she repeated, as she wrote, her eleventh grade English teacher's words, "be direct, concise, and specific"). This may have happened in the case of Lowey's student Susan Abplanalp, who included an incredible amount of specific detail in her original version of "A Sunday Morning in July" after Lowey found her previous composition wanting in detail and encouraged her to increase it. It may also be true of my student Tom MacDougal, who wrote the character study "The Marksman" after I found his previous stories strong in plot development but weak in characterization and urged him to develop character.

Though often-published teachers accept a wide range of material, apparently even when, in some cases, it does not fulfill the specific assignment, they have clear ideas about what they like and dislike in their students' writing, even if it has been published. Nevertheless, most of the teachers seem to be responsive to students' needs for support especially in writing autobiographical material, and, consequently, sometimes they don't share their full critical reactions to a composition with its author or require revisions when the author insists on the original version or when it appears that he may give up in frustration if he is pressed to revise more.

Crotty, for example, in his evaluation of the predominantly autobiographical writing that he assigns to his advanced placement students, grades mostly on style—items like effective diction, variety in sentence length, the deliberate placement of punctuation marks in accordance with many conventional uses, striking placement of parts of speech (e.g., placing the verb at the end of a sentence instead of after the subject and before the object), vivid details, and mechanical correctness. In grading a paper and in commenting on it, he usually does not give content much consideration, for he claims that he can better help students in the quality of their expression than in the quality of their thoughts. In emphasizing elements like style in his reception of works, Crotty allows students to play freely with content, however personal, without fear of having that aspect of their work criticized or rejected. This method allows Crotty to be critical of a work while minimizing the occasion for its author to interpret criticism of the content as criticism of his own experience or himself: Crotty's response is simply a reaction to how something is said not to what is said. In this, Crotty's way of

responding to students' works may encourage them to share personal material.

Mary Penson shows another kind of sensitivity to students' reactions to criticism in her awareness of how much she can press them to revise, even mechanical errors. One of her concerns, in correcting the punctuation errors of her students who are supposed to handle mechanics well, is maintaining mechanical correctness of a work without inhibiting the author's flow of ideas. To do this, she addresses mechanical problems indirectly as a way to clarify meaning. For example, she may ask a student whether replacing a comma with a semi-colon would clarify a passage. She also will not insist that a student further revise an imperfect passage when she sees that she is not winning cooperation. For example, when Phil McGrath revised his treatment of the girl in his story so her maturity seemed only somewhat more consistent according to Penson, she accepted it because she sensed his frustration: she thought that he viewed himself like an artist and his story like a canvas that would be ruined with one more stroke. She also tries to be sensitive to the effect of group criticism on individual authors, and she quickly approaches a harsh critic and the person whose work is harshly criticized individually to try to insure that in the exchange a blend of positive and negative reactions are maintained to encourage both production and precision. Her intervention may also consist of rewarding positive contributions or warning people making comments that are too negative in group discussion. She also lets respected students know how influential their comments are.

I, too, try to build on a student's strengths while I make recommendations for improvement, as I did in commending MacDougal for his skillful use of imagined plots in early stories while encouraging him to write more from experience and to develop character more, or as I did in commending Patricia Jones for her strong external conflict in her plot sketch for "Lock, Stock, and Barrel," while encouraging her to develop the internal conflict further.

Alva Lowey, too, is sensitive to student's needs for encouragement. After Susan Abplanalp's work had been light in detail, she submitted a draft of the story "Sunday Morning in July" that was too heavy in detail, but at that point Lowey probably simply expressed delight that Abplanalp had overcome the former problem. Lowey also defers to students' judgments about their work or others' work if they insist, as she did to a couple of James Kennedy's judgments about "The Crazy Blue Sports Car," or if the class finds a work flawless (and she doesn't) as she did to the judgment of Sue Kleeman's classmates about "The Grasshopper Field."

Often-published teachers usually receive students' works in a critical yet gentle way. Although, in certain cases, they may have

had little or no individual contact with a published student or may not have recommended revision, often in their conferences or recommendations in the process of writing and revising they demonstrate a sensitivity to how encouragement can serve the student and to how criticism can serve the text.

Another similarity among almost all published teachers is that they evaluate their students' imaginative writing using some special grading policy. By special I mean their evaluation differs in some way from the common procedure in which the teacher evaluates a composition by assigning a letter grade based on form, content, and mechanics. Most published teachers seem to be less comfortable evaluating imaginative writing in the straightforward way they evaluate expository compositions. Of the seven teachers I interviewed, only Bronkema seemed to have evaluated her student's paper (which was, as assigned, an expository theme) that way. Nelson uses a combination of student rating and his own reading to assign grades more leniently to stories than he assigns to exposition. Crotty, as noted above, evaluates the imaginative writing of his advanced placement students on how well they incorporate in it listed elements of a "mature style."

Four out of five often-published teachers usually assign no grades for individual imaginative compositions. Instead they seem interested in whether a student does the assignment as required or as previously contracted. The evaluation they offer, or have groups offer, is usually addressed to specific items in the text, but it can be a general reaction to the text, or both. I suspect they all share Reque's attitude: "I'm very uncomfortable in grading creative writing. I'd rather not, and I would rather write comments on it and encourage or discourage kids that way rather than to assign letter grades." As the teacher of a journalism or advanced placement English course, Reque has enough grades in other assignments so he doesn't need the grade for this imaginative work. Like Reque, I have an adequate number of grades in other assignments to determine an overall grade for the term without relying on grades for imaginative writing. Reque and I do, however, keep records of whether students submit required imaginative work. (Crotty, incidentally, permits a student to forego an assignment if he tells Crotty he can't do it.) Penson and Lowey, the two creative writing teachers, see whether students have completed everything they are supposed to and note the general quality of individual compositions. They meet with each student at the end of a marking period to assess in conference how conscientiously the student has completed assignments and how well he has written. Penson and Lowey, also sponsors of their school's literary magazines, think that writing ought to be for a specific purpose, like publication, and they have students collect

their papers with the intention of having at least the best of them reviewed by the editors of the literary magazine for possible inclusion in the forthcoming issue. Reque also asked Jones to write his piece for a local audience: a school production in which works by students are dramatized.

A summary follows of similarities among the techniques used by most of the teachers that I interviewed.

—Teachers locate imaginative writing in a planned sequence of writing.
—Teachers use professional and, especially, student models.
—Teachers convey to their students a sense of high expectations.
—Teachers win their students' trust and respect.
—Teachers space assignments to promote industry among students and to allow them time to think, to write, and to revise.
—Teachers allow students to write on just about anything, but they encourage them to write autobiographical material and to supplement it freely with imagined details.
—Teachers stipulate a form for assignments.
—Teachers encourage inspired writing even if it doesn't fit the assignment or the form stipulated.
—Teachers allow one to two weeks for students to do imaginative writing.
—Teachers are sensitive to their students' needs for support.
—Teachers respect students' opinions about their own writing and the writing of others.
—Teachers themselves form an audience for students' writing, they arrange the class to provide a student audience for them, or both.
—Teachers are careful readers of students' works, but they sense how critical to be with students so as not to discourage them.
—Teachers react orally or in writing to their students' imaginative writing either individually or as member of groups.
—Teachers *do not* assign letter grades for imaginative writing.
—Teachers may have students write toward the eventual goal of publication or performance for a local, school audience.

Following a Trail: Some Thoughts on Writing Workshops

SYDNEY LIEBERMAN
EVANSTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

Truth is one in heaven, says an old Jewish story, but it trickles down to earth in a thousand pieces. Each man comes along and finds a piece. He picks it up and begins to follow its trail. Whenever he sees someone else following a different trail, he wonders why the other man is headed in such a strange direction. There are probably as many ways to teach students to write well as there are teachers who believe in those ways. We all have our little pieces of the truth. This is mine.

My beliefs about writing are simple. First, I believe that writing, real writing, only occurs when you have something important to say. Otherwise it is just a duty or an assignment. Certainly, I write when I must, but I do it with that familiar "Do I have to?" spirit. There is quite a difference when I want to say something. I wrestle with ideas; I struggle with words. I even hate to be called from the task to eat, and I love to eat.

Second, it's scary. It's taking me—my thoughts and feelings—and dragging them outside for people to see. Will they understand? Will they like my writing? Will they think it's garbage? God, there are such insecurities involved in writing something you really care about. When my wife gives something I've written a first reading, I roam the house like an expectant parent. Rejections always crush me.

My third belief is that writing is hard work. It just doesn't come easily to me. Sometimes I feel as though I'm in a battle. At other times I feel as though I'm trying to nab butterflies barehanded. I have to work my tail off to write well, and it always strikes me as odd how simple and easy it sounds when I'm finished.

As you can see, these first three beliefs spring out of my own efforts to write. My last belief developed out of my efforts to teach it. Oddly enough, it occurred to me while I was watching some dancers. We had taken some students to a rehearsal of the musical *Joplin*. I wound up watching two dancers and a choreographer work on one number for an hour. What an hour that was! The dancers would run through their routine; at least, they would try. More times than not, their efforts would be stopped with shouts of "No! No!" Then the choreographer would leap on the stage and show them how to do it. They improved dramatically in that hour and it was obvious that it was the teacher's involvement which was crucial. He was correcting them as they

created. It made my method of teaching seem pale by comparison. I would teach something about writing to a whole class, hand out an assignment, and grade the products. I was out of the creating process. Of course, the students would revise, but they always felt that the papers were finished once they handed them in. Revisions were something you did for English teachers. I knew I had to get myself involved as they created their papers.

This feeling was reinforced two weeks later when my shower walls collapsed. I had just moved into my first house and putting up new walls seemed like an impossible task until I found out how much it would cost to have someone else do it. So I had a knowledgeable friend come over. He explained the process to me, answered my infantile questions, and gave me enough confidence to start the project. Well, I wasn't cutting drywall for very long when a whole batch of new questions occurred to me. I was on the phone and my friend was back again. And again and again. He didn't wait until I had finished and then come in and mark up my walls: "The tiles are crooked. Some aren't cut correctly. Your grouting needs work. —C Do again."

It was then that I created my first workshops, and five years later I'm still running them. I try to have the workshops embody my beliefs. I think you can best see how they do that if I concentrate on three important ingredients: the task, the atmosphere, and the role of the teacher.

I let the students decide their subjects and the manner in which they want to handle them. Now I don't do this all year. Assignments help direct students' thinking, and length or technique requirements can instill a certain kind of discipline. However, these are just tools to get students to write better. I think that there is a place for the tool of freedom during this year. My only requirement is that the paper really be a paper. I'm addicted to starts, middles, and ends. (Free writing is a step in the process of writing—a flushing out of ideas. It isn't a finished product.) I do let students write poetry if they are serious about it and don't just feel it will be easier "because it is shorter." I also encourage good writers to try poetry, especially if they are scared to death of it.

I've been lucky to have a situation where I could get students out of the building during workshops. That always gives them material to work with. There is nothing like the immediacy of an experience to produce excellent writing. However, even when I run workshops where students don't get out, the results are usually good. Kids like to tell stories. If you can harness that desire, you're in for quite a ride. You'll be amazed at the depth of feeling, the humor, the variety. I'm usually left feeling that I couldn't create an assignment which could produce comparable results. Of course, that's not always true. I re-

member one workshop where the most creative piece was one in which a student pretended to be a plant in a window watching el trains go by. I suffered through that year.

I deal with requirements in completely opposite ways. My three-week fall workshop requires a paper every other day. The pressure fits the feeling of the fall and gets the students off to a good start. I ask only for effort during my two-week spring workshop. I don't even care about finished pieces. I just ask that the students work hard at their writing. This approach frees them to try difficult pieces without worrying about grades. It allows them to fall on their faces.

Most kids are either scared by this freedom or frustrated by it. It's difficult. It's telling students to be themselves on paper. That isn't easy especially if they haven't ever done it before. I remember an A student—in fact, she was number one in her class—who wrote a moving piece about the el. It was a contest winner. However, when she turned it in, she was troubled because she wasn't sure if she had done the assignment.

The fact that it is a difficult situation for students is why the atmosphere of the workshop is so important to me. I try to make it as supportive as possible without its being goopy. I grade everything. I mark all the errors. I write all over the papers. I think I can do that and still seem supportive if I create a sense that writing is a process. My favorite expression is "It's not there yet." When I send students back to their papers, I try to let them know that they just need more work, and I try to tell them what they should do to make them better.

It's not easy; it's hard to figure out how far to push. When you guess right, it's wonderful. I remember pushing a girl into the sixth draft of a paper she cared a great deal about. But the draft wasn't good; the piece wasn't there yet. She was pacing the room and I was stalling, trying to figure out what to say to her. Finally, I just told her the truth. She burst into tears and ran out. She did come back, however, and the seventh draft of that piece was a contest winner. She told me later that she really hated me that day.

I try to produce a lot of support and openness in the group. I set up times for help teams. I put three or four students together so that they can try out parts of their papers on one another. Of course, they can do this at other times, but many students, especially at the start of a workshop, need to be forced to do this. Students will read paragraphs to their team or ask for help with a sentence or in finding a word. They learn to listen to one another, help one another, and begin to appreciate one another's work. I also have a reading time at the end of a workshop. I have students read good pieces. Criticism isn't allowed. They can only say what it is they liked about the piece. For many students, this is the first time their works have been read to their peers.

I have two jobs during workshops. One is to get students over their blocks. There are a lot of points where students stumble during the process of writing. We've all had students who can't get started or who continually crumble up their papers after two paragraphs. And we've all heard students complain about how they got lost in the middle of their paper or how they spent forty-five minutes trying to write one sentence. After listening to these frustrations year after year, I finally realized that the students were having problems at specific points in the writing process. So I began to gather gimmicks to help them over the hurdles. I play doctor. Students will come to me with a problem and I will write out a prescription. If it doesn't work, I have them come back for another.

For instance, one standard technique for helping students who can't get started is to have them play a free writing game. The rule of the game is that they must keep their pencils moving for twenty minutes. They shouldn't worry about sense, spelling, or grammar. When their minds wander over to what they did last Saturday night, they should gently try to move it back to the subject. When their minds stop working—and it will—they should rewrite the last sentence they have written over and over until their minds start up again—and it will. If the game works, there will come a time when their hands won't be able to move quickly enough. Their minds will be flying with ideas. That is usually the important material. Afterward, they can look at that section and use it to begin a paper.

However, my main role during a workshop is to roam around and help students produce great papers. I look at an introduction. I correct some grammar. I sit with a student and help with figuring out an ending. I work with someone on creating more details. I just move around and students ask me for help. I know a workshop day has been successful when I have looked at papers and been involved with individuals from start to finish. It feels very right to me. They are creating and I'm helping. I feel like their coach.

Well, that's how I run my workshops. The kids write and help each other. I help whenever and however I can. It's pretty basic. Of course, there are other ways to do it. If you are interested in trying a workshop, you might want to read *Writing Without Teachers* by Peter Elbow and *The Writing Workshop* by Alan Ziegler.

And in case you are a little nervous about doing it, here's a little advice I got once from a rancher out in Colorado. He was directing the van I was driving down a rut that might have been a road about a hundred years ago. God, what driving. When we came to a section of road that seemed to drop straight down and bend to the left, I stopped. "Alan, we'll never make it down that," I said.

He leaned forward and peered intently out the window. Then he smiled at me and said, "Just start her over the edge and let her slide."

Just start her over the edge and let her slide.

Becoming A Teller of Stories

BEVERLY HALEY
VISITING TEACHING ASSOCIATE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

"Tell me a story!"

"Have you read Stephen King's latest novel? Well, it's all about this—"

"Did you hear what happened to the Taylors last night?"

Whether we're two years old, twelve, twenty-two, fifty-two, or eighty-two, we all love a good story. And the better the story is told, the more we savor the telling. We even demand to hear the same story over and over—embellished with new details, different little twists and turns along the way. Why else do we love to gossip, to hear a clever joke, or listen raptly to a startling or dramatic or funny real life experience?

And we all know people we call "born storytellers." Is storytelling a gift reserved for the chosen few? Or is there a way to make ordinary people like you and me and our students learn something about the craft (and perhaps the art, too) of storytelling?

In a writing class, we like to think that's possible. So we begin with oral storytelling. Each person relates a favorite joke, a vivid childhood memory, or the retelling of a special book or movie. At the end of the oral storytelling, we talk about the ones that stand out, the ones we remember in vivid detail. What was different about those we still hear in the ears of memory? Can we write these stories down in a way that will be as memorable as they were when told? What is different about oral and written storytelling? We choose one of the stories to write down. Before writing, though, we need to talk about ways to punctuate dialogue if that will be part of the writing. After a given period of time (even if everyone isn't finished, we simply use as much as they've written), groups of four or five students each read and select the prize winning story from their section to read aloud to the whole class. We look at these best writings. What do they have in common? How do they differ? What elements do the "best stories"

have that either were missing or not fully developed in the others? As we discuss these elements, we are looking at the writing itself—not at the writer.

Some common elements emerge:

Imagery. We see, hear, smell, touch, experience the story.

Character. The memorable stories have people we identify with, people we know, people like ourselves, struggling to make decisions.

Tension or suspense: The story evolves in such a way that we want it to go on and on and yet at the same time we can't bear to wait to see how it all turns out. The situation and the characters combine to make the outcome terribly important. The storyteller releases just enough information at a time to capture us into the center of what is happening, yet each piece of information (each scene) moves the story forward and builds it steadily toward its turning point.

Conflict. People and places, values and priorities bash heads—not necessarily good against evil people and values but an even more painful conflict is one that sets one good against another or an evil against another evil. The sharp edges of such conflict cut deep into our involvement with what happens.

Meaning. The storyteller not only has entertained us, but the story itself and the point of view from which it is told allow us an insight into life that we can relate to ourselves and to life in general.

Quick, complete closure. The storyteller ends at the right moment, tying it all together with a single, colorful stroke, refusing to drag it out. Just the right "twist" at the end is wonderful!

Emotion. The story made us laugh or cry or shout in anger or sweat with toil.

Aesthetically pleasing. Language choice and structure are fresh, appropriate, controlled in a way that pleases both ear and eye. That sensory pleasure then communicates with the intellect and the soul.

Taking steps like these prepares us for our first actual writing of a story. Since we all like stories about "When Grandma was a girl—or Uncle Harry was a boy—" I ask each student to begin a search for a fascinating "family story." If some students say they can't get information about their own families, they can talk with an elderly neighbor or go to a home or village for retired people for someone to interview. The task requires both interviewing and research and should have a time limit for this collection of data of about a month. While they are conducting this search, class time may be used for short writing exercises and drills that build toward the point when the collected information is brought in.

Each person, through talking with various older members of the family, should look for some particular incident or tale that will be

significant and interesting not only to the individual writing the story but to the entire class. This is because all the completed stories will be reproduced and collated to form a class anthology. In our community, most students come from a common German-Russian heritage whose predecessors emigrated to the United States at about the same time and for the same reasons—to avoid military conscription and to acquire land. Hence, the stories could become repetitive and therefore boring. Because their common story is already familiar to my students, they must seek something that departs from what is shared knowledge: a different situation, a new twist to the old story, a fresh viewpoint or style of telling, something intensely personal, an unusual clash between characters or values.

Class members interview older members of the family on both the paternal and the maternal sides if possible. They can recall a family reunion and write the physical details and personality idiosyncracies that characterize one side of the family and maybe some of the stories told at that reunion. Some may want to write letters to relatives living in another area or to travel to nearby towns to talk to other relatives. But besides the personal interviews, they need to look at old scrapbooks and photo albums, newspaper clippings, old letters, Bible records, pertinent items in the local historical society or library or newspaper office. Through all this collecting of data, students take responsibility for careful and complete documentation and accurate notes.

In class we take some time to talk about successes and problems encountered in collecting the data; we share general information and discoveries. What kinds of questions can we ask that will encourage these older relatives to open up completely and give the details we need to make a story interesting and complete? How do we listen to their answers in a way that opens our minds to new questions to ask? We talk about how to describe and how to draw inferences from old photos (the clothes, hairstyles, facial expressions, ages, postures, composition of the pictures); and from the language and style used in old letters and newspaper clippings or family records. We discuss the differing customs, values, language, work and leisure time, family structure and duties, material possessions, and food characteristic to particular time period or nationality, marking traits common to and different from similar elements today. We talk about how these details might be used or might affect the way a story will be told.

Now comes the toughest decision. They are bursting with stories and discoveries. They want to tell everything—in boring detail. But out of all this material they must select the one incident that most excites or moves or interests them and write down in one sentence what that story is about. We have had, for example, the story of a

great-grandfather who carried his bees and apiary equipment by train from place to place across the country until he found the spot where the honey would be mild and sweet. We had the story of some long-ago outlaw relative hanged in Texas, and we learned of the tragic loss of family members on the ocean voyage to America.

Once the choice is made, each student sorts through the data and sets aside anything and everything that does not directly relate to the chosen idea. Cold objectivity comes hard but is necessary. The student examines the remaining details, searching for groupings, for patterns, for chronological order or comparisons and contrasts, for causes and effects or a dominant impression. Where might be the best place to begin? To end?

Now each person thinks about what kind of story this is—a love story, adventure, comedy, tragedy, horror; one of inspiration, hard luck, courage, or cowardice? Defining the type of story helps the writer make decisions about how best to use details and the kinds of language choices that will complement and enrich or set into contrast the action, setting, and characters. We talk about how understatement is most effective when the situation is powerful, and vice versa.

Another decision that needs to be made before writing begins is: Whose story is this and who is the best person to tell the story? Is the story the grandfather's or the great-grandfather's? Maybe the narrator should be some other member of the cast of characters in the story or maybe the narrator should simply be the author of the story. Will we want to use first person or third person? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Once the decision is made, the writer must stay inside the narrator's skin for the entire story.

We talk about ways of writing. How much will be description? Dialogue? Exposition? What kind of language would the narrator use? The other people in the story? How much does setting affect the story? How much background information should be given—and how should it be given? How do the people in the story feel about and act toward each other? How can we, in unobtrusive strokes, color in the details that paint images of physical and personality traits, setting, mood, tone? We talk about nouns and verbs—the general and the specific, the abstract and the concrete. About action verbs as opposed to linking verbs; the active voice as opposed to the passive; present tense or past tense. We talk about effective ways to use metaphor and simile, personification, and analogy. How do we move from one scene to the next?

Throughout the writing, two questions must always be in front of each author: What is the purpose or the point of this story? How can I SHOW instead of TELL it?

After each person notates a proposed sequence of scenes along with the purpose, the point of view, and the content of story, then the writing of the first draft can be done in class. The teacher moves about, available for consultation. Ideally, the writing should be done in one sitting. The next day small groups read aloud their first drafts to each other. Reading orally helps writers and listeners discover ways to add, delete, change. Rough spots, ambiguities, incomplete details, lack of accuracy, boring places, all need to be reworked. Maybe a different arrangement of paragraphs or details will strengthen the total effect. The initial writing should undergo at least one or two more drafts. Careful proofreading of a final, neatly typed or handwritten copy is a must. Writers should always remember to do everything possible to ease the reader's task, and that includes neatness and words spelled correctly.

Each student should read or send a copy of the completed story to the relative who originally told it. What is that relative's reaction? Has the writer told the story "true"? Has he or she told it in such a way that it fairly "sings" along?

Satisfying the original storyteller meets the writer's first test. The second comes in reading it along with the other stories in the completed class anthology. Giving class time for reading that anthology is a just and satisfying reward for hard work done well. Besides that, as a communal experience it yields much fruit. Classmates learn about each other and themselves, get ideas about ways to write, share pride in work prepared together, and gain respect for one another's special talents and qualities of character. They have woven a thread to connect themselves to each other and to their past. They read with fresh awareness and delight.

And each has acquired something of the craft (and maybe the art) of the storyteller.

Putting Life in the Short Story: Warmup Exercises That Work

MARY PENSON
(RETIRED)
DEKALB HIGH SCHOOL

Whether you're fortunate enough to have students in a bona fide creative writing class where you've already established an accepting and nurturing climate, or whether you have just completed a genre

unit and would like your students to try their hand at writing a short story, the assignment is bound to strike a little terror in their collective hearts. It's one thing to write a parody or fable where there is solid ground from which to take off, or an essay where there is personal experience or opinion for a launching pad; but the short story calls for real fiction, a fabrication by the author, a building of imaginative elements into a fictive whole—and that's shaky ground. I prefer to approach the short story assignment through a series of warmup exercises, any of which may become the nucleus of a short story.

I start with a review of the various elements that go into the construction of short fiction. As an example for analysis, I use Poe's "Cask of Amontillado," which most students know. If it is unfamiliar to them, read it aloud (it's short) or inveigle your Speech teacher or a drama student to tape the story for you. After the reading, I try to draw upon students' prior knowledge of the various elements of the short story. They generally come up with character, plot (including structure, point of view and conflict), dialogue, and perhaps setting. Symbol, imagery, author's style or tone, and the message sometimes have to be pointed out to them. After we've discussed how the various elements in Poe's story blend together to make a cohesive and exciting whole, I move into the warmups, hoping to spark a story somewhere along the way. I prefer to start with setting.

SETTING

I've used two stimuli here, one visual, one oral. I bring in a half dozen mounted pictures and place them on the chalk board rail or some other convenient place and ask students to write just a paragraph or two of description that would set the mood for a story. I use colorful pictures designed to stir the imagination. From one such picture of a large old house decorated from top to bottom with Chinese lanterns came the following piece.

The Year of the Dragon

Tomorrow the first-born grandson will go to the shiny new school down the street. He'll come home and ask for hamburgers and fudge brownies. He will turn on the TV, sit and watch BATMAN. He will forget that today is the beginning of the Year of the Dragon.

Centuries of noble dynasties and beautiful flowers will not touch him. When he is told of the greatness of Confucius he will only sigh and re-fill his water pistol. Bright lanterns only mean that grandmother will be distant and think of old times today.

> But time will not stand still, and progress will be made. Lanterns are made of paper and flowers wilt. The dynasties were ruthless and democracy is good. The first-born grandson has so many opportunities. And when he is eighteen he can join his father in laundering Mr. Schwartz's shirts.

My other approach is through the reading of opening paragraphs of some famous stories where mood and reader expectancy are created by word choice. Good for this sort of pump-priming are the opening one or two paragraphs of stories such as Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher," Crane's "The Open Boat," Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party," Thurber's "The Catbird Seat," and Jackson's "The Lottery." After each reading I ask what sort of story the reader is led to expect. Students generally come very near to the mark with everything but "The Lottery"—that is, unless they already know it—because Jackson purposely uses a pastoral setting to contrast with the violence of her ending.

After the discussion I ask students to write a short opening paragraph or two of setting that would ready the reader for a story to follow. These settings we read in a critique group where students can learn whether or not they succeeded in evoking the mood they meant to create. I change my setting examples from class to class. The reading of a portion of Richard Brautigan's "The Old Bus" may have prompted this mood piece.

The Ride

> Softly. A harmonica let forth its orphaned notes. They drifted forward, teasing the sleeping people, lightly entering their dreams, turning about and leading them from their slumber to an uncomfortable perch on the borderline of sleep. The bus driver lifted his eyes and gazed into his mirror as the soft melody reached him. He adjusted it slightly to see the back of the bus where the music was coming from.
>
> He saw nothing at first, only the many stars that shone through the back window. Then the boy lying on the back seat put his harmonica in his shirt pocket and slowly sat up. As he did, his form extinguished the light of some of the stars from the driver's view. The driver checked the road, then looked back in his mirror and let his imagination be fed. Immense, shimmery stars were being attacked and defeated by the silhouette of the boy. Dispassionate, darkest flurry of night, the blackness of the boy moved forward, spitting stars out like phlegm. Then the child sat straight up, holding the

winter-time constellation of Orion captive behind him. The driver carefully followed a curve in the road then allowed his eyes to be drawn to the mirror again.

The child sat and yawned; sleep would not come. He raised his arm and stretched it. The bus driver watched as the dark outline of the boy's arm became an eclipse of unknown places. Reaching eternally out, it navigated countless light years, till it pointed straight up. The boy spread the fingers of his hand delicately, lingeringly, stroked over each quivering star, lightly caressing underneath the blouse of the night sky.

The driver smiled at his creativity: the ride wouldn't seem as long now.

PLOT

I ditto and distribute a plot outline or two for various conflicts so that students can have a pattern to follow. The plot outlines are brief and geared to the students' experience. Here are a few I suggest to students.

man vs. man Two sisters, one quiet, one vivacious and confident, are interested in the same boy. Confident one goes after and gets boy. In an effort to belittle sister, she tells boy that sister likes him. Trick backfires when boy likes quiet sister better.

man vs. society Boy wants to be an artist, but family persuades him to be a draftsman so he can succeed in the commercial world. He dreams of painting but becomes an unhappy draftsman; or he drops out of engineering school to live the bohemian life of a painter.

man vs. himself A high school senior is given a golf scholarship to Northwestern University and an anonymous donor pays his expenses to live in a fraternity house. Conflict arises when his poor family comes on campus to visit him and he is ashamed to present them to his wealthy frat brothers.

man vs. nature Man shipwrecked on an island must build a fire, shelter and find food in order to survive. He succeeds only to discover that he is being watched by a native tribe hiding in the hills.

man vs. man A Mexican boy, proud of his heritage, is taunted by Anglo kids when his family moves north to work in the canneries of the mid-west. He becomes a championship wrestler and thereby gains the respect of his peers.

I suggest that students look over the various conflicts (add some of your own) and develop a short plot outline. We then examine these outlines, discussing their possibilities for development. Students often help each other to clarify beginning plot structure.

POINT OF VIEW

I select a few simple stories students are familiar with—fairy tales or fables work nicely—and ask them to rewrite one from a different point of view. I emphasize the change of interpretation that takes place when action is seen through different eyes. As an example I cite John Gardner's GRENDEL, which is a retelling of the BEOWULF story from the point of view of the monster; or ask them to try a version of "Little Red Riding Hood" from the point of view of the wolf.

Lone Wolf

It's a slow hungry day. I haven't been able to catch even a rabbit. When I come home empty-handed I'll hear about it from my wife and little kid. Wait! Here comes something. It's a little girl in a red cape. She can't be more than five or six. I'll bet she's tender. But little girls are pretty smart these days, so I'll have to be clever.

Hello, little girl, and where are you going? . . . Oh, to your grandmother's house. . . . And what is it you have in your basket? . . . My that bread smells good. I'm sure your grandmother will be pleased. Do you have far to go? . . . Oh, I see. Just over the hill and at the edge of the woods in a little white house. I believe I've seen that house. Well, have a nice day.

Now if I can take a shortcut, I'll just nip into grannie's house and get in bed; and if I can't catch the little girl, at least I'll be able to snatch the basket of goodies. There's grannie in bed now. I'll just holler "boo" and scare her into the closet. Good! Now I'll put on her nightcap and crawl into bed. Ah! Just in time. Here comes the little girl now.

Hello, my dear. How lovely to see you. Come kiss your old Grannie. . . . What was that? Oh, my big ears. . . . The better to hear you with, my dear. . . . My big eyes? Well, of course. The better to see you with. . . . My big teeth? . . . Well, love, the better to. . . . Oh hello, Mr. Woodsman. I was just leaving.

I think I'd better make a rapid exit here or I not only won't have any dinner to take home to the family, I won't have any hide either.

Another Point of View—The Epistolary Approach

I have read or have students read Ring Lardner's "Some Like Them Cold" and ask how the epistolary approach adds drama and excitement to the story. Students are quick to point out that we as readers

know more about the character of the two people involved than they seem to know about themselves. Then I suggest that they write a letter to someone, giving not only some news but revealing to that person something of their own character. This is one of those assignments I like to start during class, since it enables me to write as they write. I often use this technique—sharing with students my own product—finished or unfinished. This sharing seems to give students either an idea of their own or at least the confidence to try to top my efforts. The following story is one response I got using the epistolary approach.

Poor Frank

Dear Roma,

I've been getting quite worried about Frank lately. I'm beginning to think he might be going insane. I don't like to talk of it, although it can't be hidden any longer. I don't even know when hunting season started. He just started getting that crazy look in his eyes—you know, that wide, incredulous stare that most crazy people get. The way he looks at me. . . .

It isn't just me he stares at, it's everything. I talked with that nice doctor about it and he said he'd talk with Frank although what good would that do? Our marriage is falling apart; and you know I don't like to throw the blame on anyone, but I think it all has a lot to do with Frank's going crazy. It upsets me dreadfully, and you know I'm not a strong woman. Sometimes I'll be sitting in the living room reading, and he'll come in and start saying things right off the top of his mind, just like he was crazy.

I've considered putting him away, although you know I don't like those asylums any better than the next person—the way they treat you like animals there—but if Frank needs to get well again, he might have to go.

That doctor is such a sweet man. You might know him, Doctor Roberts is his name, and he is just a darling—although I do dislike the leather chair that I sit in when I go to talk with him about Frank. It's very uncomfortable; and you know I don't like to say anything about decor, so I just don't say anything about that uncomfortable chair. The curtains are pretty, and he has the cutest little painting of a little boy and his dog that I just adore.

Frank just came in looking at me that way again. I'm scared, Roma. I think the more he looks at me the crazier he's

getting. I can't help being scared, but the dogs seem to have that look in their eyes too, and the more and more I see it, the more and more I am sure that everyone in this house is suffering from something. Sometimes I get so worried I don't know what I'm doing, and I can't remember my name, that's how scared I get. It happened in the grocery while I was buying cheese. I meant to write a check, but I got so worried over Frank that I couldn't remember my name. That nice cashier gal showed it to me at the top of the check, and we certainly had a good laugh over that. I told her I couldn't remember my name because I was worried that my husband was going insane; and you know, Roma, that girl got that look in her eyes too.

Bought some new garden chairs. Cutest things you ever saw. Except I can't enjoy them much; what with Frank going crazy, and my trips to the doctor to discuss the possibilities of putting him away. I wrote to Mother, and she said to ignore the whole thing, that there was nothing wrong with Frank at all. But you know Mother, she wouldn't think a crazy person was crazy—just different—that's what she always says. I had lunch out today while I was shopping for material. Cutest little place. Chinese food. But you know, Roma, there I was, sitting in that restaurant, and all of a sudden I start getting worried that Frank really went crazy, and maybe killed himself, so all of a sudden I couldn't remember where I was. My gloves didn't fit, and I couldn't seem to remember where I bought the dress I was wearing. Sometimes I can't stand it with Frank on the brink, and me a nervous wreck. But I think it's odd that Frank suggests I see the doctor each week to talk about him. He sometimes even drives me there. The poor poor man. Here is a man going crazy, and he even allows me to speak of it. I told a lady on the streetcorner—we were both waiting for the light to change—I told her that poor Frank was crazy, and she said of course he is; and Roma, I am so frightened that word is getting around. That woman knew, Roma, and the only people who know Frank is going crazy is myself and the doctor. Sometimes I think maybe Frank is right out there in the streets telling everyone that he's gone crazy, and here I am trying to keep it a secret, trying to keep the family name up.

Sometimes I'll wake up in the morning and think Frank is dead. It might be better that way Roma, it might be better if he killed himself. I can't go on worrying that he'll kill me, or kill someone and really get himself into a mess. Went out

shopping for the Christmas tree. Had a good laugh over it all with the man at the greenhouse. I asked him for the best tree he had, and he said wasn't I funny, here it being August 10th, and me wanting a Christmas tree. I said, yes how silly of me to forget, and you know, he got that look in his eyes, same as Frank; so now here I am thinking maybe it's going around, you know, like the flu.

Have to go now. You know how hard Thanksgiving dinners are to plan, and I can't leave Frank alone too long. I'll write you if I decide to have him put away. Keep in touch.

Love,
Maggie

DIALOGUE

Before we try writing dialogue, I hand out a ditto showing samples from a short story or novel which illustrate not only that a new paragraph is required each time the speaker changes but also that there are many ways to avoid the stilted use of "he said," "she said," "and then he said." Then, as a prepping exercise, I present a little pantomime for students to embellish with dialogue.

One of the mimes I've successfully used involves a mother and son. I select a volunteer for the latter and I play the mother. Son enters as mother is doing something at the sink or stove. Son tries to tell her something but she talks at him incessantly. He leaves but turns at the door and tries to get a word in, unsuccessfully. A second later he opens the door and tries once again only to have the mother shoo him. After he leaves, she does a double take, the lightbulb of realization goes on over her head, and she quickly hurries to the door. Immediately after this brief scene I ask students to flesh out the action with dialogue. The pantomime is sketchy enough so that a number of interpretations are possible.

CHARACTER

By now, some of the students have a short story either in mind or emerging on paper. I use one last exercise before I utter the fateful words: "Your short story is due next Friday"—the exploration of the use of character in the short story. Below is a character worksheet which I expand onto an 8½ x 11 hand-out. I explain that while not all the information on the sheet may appear as part of the story, all should be known to the author so the character rings true. I urge students to take as their model someone they know, exercising the writer's prerogative to use only that part of reality which serves the purpose. They may add whatever fictive details are necessary to carry the message.

CHARACTER WORKSHEET

SEX
AGE
GENERAL PHYSICAL APPEARANCE
  Size—
    Height
    Weight
  Color of hair
  Color of eyes
  Posture
RELATIONSHIP TO:
  Father
  Mother
  Sister/s
  Brother/s
SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND
PERSONAL LIKES
PERSONAL DISLIKES
HOBBIES
SELF-CONCEPT
  Areas of inadequacy
  Areas of strength

Then I go through the list, pointing out story possibilities as I go. The pattern sounds something like this:

Sex: Is this a young person like you, an older friend, a teacher perhaps, your grandmother or grandfather, your kid brother or sister? Aren't there some story possibilities there?

Age: You must know how old your character is so that he or she behaves in the way someone that age would act. If you're writing about a five-year-old, your character can use only the words and insights that age has.

Physical Appearance: Rather than using direct description, let your reader intuit character's appearance. Perhaps a jealous girl friend can ask if she uses a platinum rinse and the reader will know we have a blonde. Perhaps mother can tell her to take off some of the make-up because she looks just like Brooke Shields. That clues the reader that this is a rather attractive young lady. There are story possibilities here. Perhaps your character does not have long blonde hair and a Brooke Shields face but is positive every other girl in the Sophomore class has. Posture tells a lot about character. A slouch may mean insecurity if it's accompanied by downcast eyes or "Joe-Cool" if it's accompanied by an exaggerated saunter (probably also masking insecurity).

Inter-personal Relationships: There's a wealth of conflict material here. Perhaps Father is tyrannical and must be gotten around. Perhaps Mother is unyielding and Father must be appealed to. For example, Mother thinks you can wear last year's prom dress to the Valentine dance, but Father can be persuaded that you need a new one. Sisters and brothers, big and small, can offer a wealth of conflict as well as pleasure.

Socio-Economic Background: Is your character poor and running with a more moneyed crowd? (Salinger's "The Laughing Man" is a good example to give students here.) Is your character from the "right side of the tracks"? Does this fact produce a superior attitude or a "poor rich kid" syndrome? Or perhaps your character is poor but convinced he is better than his family background. ("The Duke's Children," a good example, is often anthologized.)

Personal Likes and Dislikes: You must know what pleases and displeases your character to flesh him out as a real person.

Hobbies: Again, as in likes and dislikes, although this element may not be the basis of a short story, it may be one element that helps to develop your character's personality. I think of Leper of *A Separate Peace* whose fancy for botany and skiing defined his character.

Self-Concept: How do you feel about yourself? What are the things about yourself that you are proud of? What are the facets of your personality that you can't stand? Explore your mind and see if there isn't a story-character waiting there to be developed. How does your private self convert into a public self?

The student story which has inspired the greatest response in my classes is the one written by a girl about her grandfather.

Every Day Has Its Time

"February twelfth. . . ah yes, Abraham Lincoln. Good man. Yes he was a good man even though he was republican! He was fair, he was honest . . . Honest Abe they called him. D'you know that Andy?

"Yes Uncle . . ." I tried to say more but Uncle Renaldo continued.

"Sometimes I wonder what these history teachers are teaching these days. Abe Lincoln. He freed the slaves ya know. Well, he gave it a damned good try . . . all these other politicians had to come in and take over, forgot what old Abe stood for. Back when I was in history we had to learn the Gettysburg Address. I learned it and I never regretted it. You should spend your time on something like that Andy. I still

got it in mind . . . let's see . . . Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth . . ."

That was Grandfather, well Uncle Renaldo . . . Dad always called him that. I never knew why. Us kids picked it up and never knew him as anything else. I don't even know what his real name was, guess nobody knew. I never thought to ask.

Uncle Renaldo was always around doing things at our house, complaining about Gramma, telling us about Lincoln, or Washington or Roosevelt, whoever was famous enough to have a birthday on the calendar. "Andy," he used to say to me, "what do you do first thing in the morning?"

"Aw, I stretch I guess . . ." I never really knew how to answer his questions.

"Yah I guess you would, growing boy that you are. Me? I always look at my calendar first thing. Reminds me that every day's got a meaning, every day's got its time."

Uncle Renaldo was tall and large. Lots of old people shriveled up when they got old; they got wrinkles. Not Uncle Renaldo. He looked old sure, but no prune face for him. He was like an old book whose pages had worn smooth on the corners. His hair was silvery white, and so was his beard. His eyes were firm, a solid blue color. They looked like the gas flame on our stove when he was angry, filled with flicks of gold and orange. His voice wasn't loud really, it just seemed loud because he was always talking. "Speak up Andy!" He used to boom at me. "How you ever going to be president if you don't talk up?" Before my mouth was half open he'd launch into another history lesson.

I could never understand how a nice old lady like Gramma ever got married to a crazy man like Uncle Renaldo. Gramma was pretty, for an old lady anyway. She twinkled like all Grandmothers should. She always had rolls for me, and coffee when I'd stop by after school. In her sewing machine she had six drawers. Me and my brother each had one to put secret things in. She'd lock them up and then give us the key. We felt so important locking and unlocking those drawers.

Uncle Renaldo always called Gramma "Mother Beast." "Mother Beast," he'd say at Sunday dinner, "bring out the gravy and sit down so we can say the Thank You's and get started."

Sunday dinners were always special. We'd pile over the old house on Market Street and eat a glorious feast. On Sundays I could always eat everything, even green beans. Uncle Renaldo's Thank You's were always funny. On Sun-

day he would examine the week and let the "Almighty" (Uncle Renaldo always called him that), know exactly what went wrong that week and gave him orders to set it straight.

One Sunday in June the Mother Beast didn't bring out the gravy. Her place at the table was empty. Ma fixed the dinner, same as Gramma had done. Things seemed the same but Uncle Renaldo didn't say the Thank You's that day, nor any other Sunday from then on. I asked my dad why not and he said that Uncle Renaldo was mad at the Almighty and was settling his differences in private.

Uncle Renaldo was quiet for many days after Gramma had gone. He hardly every came over and when I went there he was always reading or sometimes writing. Then one day I stopped by after school. I kind of forgot and was still thinking about coffee and rolls. Uncle Renaldo smiled when I came in and greeted me like he hadn't seen me in months.

"Andy, my boy, where have you been keeping yourself? We haven't had a good talk in a long time. The Mother Beast wouldn't have approved of you ignoring me like that. It's a funny thing about the Mother Beast, she didn't often get mad, but when she did get rubbed the wrong way she certainly managed to get me riled up too. Oh that Mother Beast, such a lovely woman, shoulda been a president's wife. . . ." He laughed heartily.

"But Uncle Renaldo, she was . . . wasn't she?"

"Oh Andy, she was too good for me. Now Abe Lincoln, he woulda liked our Mother Beast."

Gramma had now entered the ranks of Abe Lincoln. I hope she knew cause she woulda been pleased.

After that Uncle Renaldo was pretty much the same as before in the time when we had the gravy on Sundays. He spent most of his time at our house getting in Ma's way, talking to me and advising Dad that he really ought to have a vegetable garden. He talked more and more . . . even when no one listened. On the twelfth of every month we heard the Gettysburg Address. On the fourth of July he read the Declaration of Independence to all of us. At first I was bored but then I listened. History started to make sense to me.

School started again. All the kids were tan and haircuts were needed. I got busy and didn't see Uncle Renaldo much. I heard Ma talking to Dad on how he was always mumbling. One Sunday he forgot and called for Gramma to bring the gravy. I laughed, remembering the Thank You's I guess. Ma

kicked me hard under the table.

October rolled around and one Saturday I was really bored. Everyone else had family outings and I didn't have anyone to play with. In the late afternoon I went over to Market Street. Uncle Renaldo was glad to see me. We went for a walk and I listened to him talk about the Depression. Gee, was he sad. As we walked past the field he said to me, "Andy, see that little rise in the soil?"

"That there used to be a mountain. We called it mud mountain. As a kid I always played there. Just noticed there is no mud mountain. Rain just washed it down."

"It's erosion," I said, surprised I remembered something from geography.

"Erosion . . . yeah, funny how everything erodes away."

It was dusky now and our walk was done. Uncle Renaldo stopped in front of his house. "Well Andy, I'm tired . . . long walk for us. Abe Lincoln used to walk. Ol' Abe liked long talkin' walks. Chill in the air tonight . . . gonna be cold soon." With that Uncle Renaldo turned and walked into the house.

It was report card day at school. Coming home I saw Dad's car in front of the house. He's home early I thought. The house was still when I went in and mom was in the kitchen. I slapped my books on the table. She started and turned, her eyes were sad and red.

I guess I knew right then, but I said, "I'm going over to Uncle Renaldo's before supper."

Before she could stop me I ran out the door and down to Market Street. The old house was so empty. I was glad to be there all alone so I could remember Uncle Renaldo. I couldn't cry, heck I was 9 years old, so I just sat in Uncle Renaldo's chair feeling real alone, real empty. Funny thing came to mind. ". . . every day's got its time." Today was the twelfth. I thought of Old Abe, Gramma, not at all about Uncle Renaldo. My report card was clutched in my hands. Glancing at it I saw, History—A. I set it on his desk, hoping he'd be proud.

—Sally Hakala

If that reading doesn't spark a story, nothing will. Well, not quite nothing. There's always the thematic approach, or the historical, or the social. . . . But that's another story.

"Whaddaya Mean 'Be Specific?' ": A Process For Teaching Detail

Steve Athanases
Arlington High School
Arlington Heights

"Be specific," we pen in the margins. "Cite examples." "Use detail." Unfortunately, none of these suggestions proves adequate in helping most students to understand what exactly to do to make a composition more alive with specifics. A method is needed for illustrating to students just what "specific" means.

THE VALUE OF DETAIL

Details can clarify, support, and illustrate a point made. In imaginative writing, they often make the point. Consider this excerpt from John Updike's "A&P" in which Sammy, the narrator, uses little more than detail to make the point of contrast between his family and that of Queenie, a young girl who has entered the A&P in a swimsuit and caught Sammy's eye:

> All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. Her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow-ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them. When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with "They'll Do It Every Time" cartoons stenciled on.

The contrasting details here make the point successfully (and in a fresh and lively manner) because they quickly and clearly paint dimensions of the world we know.

THE IMAGE

Details—clear, colorful, and concrete—that appeal to the senses and tend to trigger the imaginations of readers are images. These "word representations" of physical experience, often similes and metaphors, are fine tools for strengthening imaginative writing. For models, let students see how many twentieth century fiction writers, poets, and lyricists have been clever imagists. Consider, for example, the impact and levels of meaning created by the images in this excerpt

from Frank Norris' *The Octopus*, in which an early-1900's rancher imagines an approaching train as symbol of the doom of his way of life:

> Then, faint and prolonged, across the levels of the ranch, he heard the engine whistling for Bonneville. Again and again, at rapid intervals in its flying course, it whistled for road crossings, for sharp curves, for trestles; ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance; and abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, Cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.

Students will be glad to see that many contemporary songwriters (among them, Billy Joel, Joni Mitchell, and Randy Newman) rely heavily on imagery to record experience. Note the unusual details and imagery used by Tom Waits to create these two characters in his song "The Ghosts of Saturday Night (After Hours at Napoleone's Pizza House)":

> And a solitary sailor
> Who spends the facts of his life like small change
> on strangers
> Paws his inside P-coat pocket
> For a welcome 25¢
> And the last bent butt from a package of Kents
> Dreams of a waitress
> With Maxwell House eyes,
> Marmalade thighs
> And scrambled yellow hair
> As she draws heavily on a Viceroy
> And wipes the wisps of dishwater blond from her eyes
> Her rhinestone studded moniker
> Says IRENE

Writing with Detail and Imagery: Getting Started

Students need to understand the principle that little is much—that a composition focused in time and place, covering only *one* incident,

can be far stronger than the piece that covers years and only skims the surface. I suggest that students zero in on a brief experience (only a few moments) and put it under the microscope for the reader, allowing the scene to richly unfold in vivid detail.

I also encourage students in the early stages to avoid choosing as writing subjects the Major Issues of their lives. I explain that an important skill is that of bringing freshness to a seemingly mundane topic. This proves helpful for various reasons:

1) The details come more easily when drawn from "everyday experience"
2) Students avoid disastrous first attempts like "All About Love" or "Death"
3) The nothing-big-ever-happened-in-my-life students are less intimidated
4) Since the topic doesn't seem inherently interesting, the focus shifts from content to using language to create interest

Thus, the subject is not controlling the writer; the writer must control the subject and begin learning to control language.

First Assignment: On the Job

The following assignment is designed for upper-level high school students who have held part-time jobs. Other similar topics can be easily substituted for the one provided.

Day One

After a brief roll call of part-time jobs held by class members, I ask students to create a list of at least ten images (in phrases or sentences) that describe a typical day at some job they've held. The students generally worry that they'll never create interesting images from such horribly dull situations. That's half the challenge. I tell them to consider all the senses.

Questions to Sharpen Writing

As the class begins working on these lists, I ask them:

—What sounds did you hear daily?
—Any smells there?
—What visual images stick with you?
—Any typical quotes from fellow employees or customers?

I move through the room, checking papers, questioning students individually while they're still shaping the items on their lists:

—You mention the sound of the radio playing. What *radio station* or *song* was usually piped over the speakers?
—You mention "the sounds of the cash register." What *exact sounds* did the cash register make? Can you compare these sounds to something else?

—You mention the counter girl running in the back room to buy a soft drink. *Who* was that counter girl? And what type of soft drink did she buy?

—You say food smells wafted from the kitchen. What *specific food smells* do you recall? Can you describe these? Can you compare any of them to something else?

From this type of questioning technique, the students begin to realize *how* specific to be, and they can redirect their thinking and writing *while in the process*. Also, as I move through the room, I read aloud some samples of effective images just created. This reinforces those writers, lets the class hear models and be assured originality with something seemingly mundane is possible, and challenges the students to reach and revise *while composing*.

A Sample Student List of Details and Images

Dunkin' Donuts

1) a hot pink prison
2) Bruce Springsteen blaring out from a flour infested radio
3) greasy donut racks that fill the back room
4) adolescents smoking stale Marlboros
5) elderly ladies sipping green tea with cream
6) a coffee grinder that inevitably breaks down when we need it the most
7) "Sixty-four Dunkin' Munchkins, please"
8) raspberry donuts soaring across the back room like rockets from a launching pad
9) the hiss of the filling machine struggling to fit too much jelly into an under-sized donut
10) "Four dozen maple donuts and two pots of coffee, NOW!"
11) the counter full of lonely truckers wanting to share their lives with me as they roll down the road

—Jane McGill

First Assignment: Day Two

Form circle for better listening.

a) Students begin reading their lists aloud.
b) After readings from five students, class members are asked to name images they recall from each list just read. Writers are immediately reinforced for effective use of detail.
c) Repeat process after each group of five.
d) Students are asked to look around the circle at class members,

recalling each list just read, and to jot down five to ten of the most memorable individual images from any lists.

e) We quickly read off these brief lists and I make note of favorite class images.

f) I point out exactness and sensory appeal of the favorites.

Some samples of favorite images from one class:

—The girls at 31 Flavors dressed in Pepto-Bismol pink uniforms

—Thirty shivering kids at Recreation Pool wrapped in towels like swamis

—The rancid odor of catalytic fumes waiting to jump out and attack at the turn of the key

—My grain scoop stirs up billows of dust as I plunge it into the bin; it comes up dripping oats

Students are asked to revise their lists in preparation for a written assignment the next day.

Day Three

Students are asked to use their best details and images in a one-paragraph description of just a few moments on the job. The tight focus again forces them to be highly specific.

Day Four

We evaluate the students' use of detail; I read all the compositions aloud (switching the classes' papers if I have two sections of the course), asking students to assign scores from 1–4, based on how clearly the scene was brought to life.

Day Five

Before returning the compositions marked with average scores from peer evaluations, I announce the class favorites, seizing the opportunity once again to point out the effective use of detail in favorites such as these:

Olympic Pool

My shrill Acme-Thunderer whistle sliced through the chlorinated haze and shocked a would-be diver to the point of belly-flopping. The diving board echoed repeatedly, revealing the excess weight of the now red-faced diver and exposing the reason that our staff had nick-named her Orca —the Killer Whale. At the threat of my shrieking whistle, which signaled the beginning of adult swim, Martians clad in goggles, ear plugs and nose plugs produced cannonball

splashes in attempts to drench my guard chair. Mr. and Mrs. Dexatrim marched from the locker rooms, collected their patriotic kickboards, and diligently began swimming their laps. Having found their places, the Incredible Floating Ladies lay back and gazed at the ceiling, dreaming of the French Silk pie they could indulge in as a reward for the calories they were now so busily burning. Big busted backstrokers bobbed alternately down their lanes while their knobby-kneed husbands shakily made their way down the ladder.

I leaned back in my plastic yellow chair and serenaded by FM 100, reduced my vision to a rainbow blur of flower arrangement bathing caps.

—Mary Sells

The Lutheran Home

The doors rattle shut, leaving me and my cart in a cubicle that smells of age. The elevator hesitates, then climbs reluctantly to the first floor. The doors open and I weave my cart skillfully between the nurses' station and aides feeding wrinkled unfortunates who cannot feed themselves. At the end of the hall is my dining room. A dime store oil painting hangs from the wall in an attempt to make the room look homey. Irving is waiting already, wearing his suitcoat soiled with this afternoon's dinner and perhaps yesterday's. I reach around the corner of the doorway and ring the buzzer, calling them all to eat. Wheelchairs and walkers peer, then creep out of doorways, beginning their long pilgrimage to supper.

—Jenny Wade

Kelly Oldsmobile

Sliding down real low so I won't be noticed, I rip off my nice cords and quickly slip into my grubby jeans and sweatshirt. I hop out of my car and begin the trek through the used car lot. Dan—the grouchy one—is already eyeing me to come help him with plates—but no, I must punch in first. I spot Gene and Pops putting the final touches on a two-toned Cutlass, and next to them the old Chinaman who never speaks is methodically fixing a brake line. Shulte, or Baldy, is on my right, swearing at an old Chrysler which has just been traded in. Behind Shulte I notice the garbage cans wait-

ing to be emptied, grease dripping off the tops of old heavy accessories. I talk to Whitey about the Sox game (we're both big fans) and then Bob the greaseman (he's only nineteen and he's already got a kid—but no wife) calls to me to check out a new stereo. Rattling engines, blow torches, and the smell of carbon monoxide fumes have greeted me as I prepare to begin work. Divito, the bow-tied boss, gazes up from his cluttered corner nest: "Where the hell ya been, James?"

—Jim Grundberg

Eagle

Damn! My hand retreats from the void beneath the register, a usual hiding place for freezer bags. My apologetic, slightly shell-shocked expression extracts no sympathy from a grim-faced housewife leering down at me, over her by now semi-frozen mountain of groceries. Another Saturday morning madhouse at Eagle, off to a fine start. The computerized registers emit nonstop R2D2 droid sounds, the groceries, like ocean waves, roll in and out—but never ebb completely. Heads up! Here comes Bill. Faces taut, the hardened "full-timers" check with robot precision under the boss' watchful eye. Though still young, their faces tell tales of too many cigarettes, too many jobs. It's better if you don't think about it, their tired, worldly eyes seem to say. Just do the job, put in your hours, and then go back to living—the husband, the condo, and camping trips to Devil's Lake. My musings have no place in this conveyor belt cage. Turn, reach, grab, dodge. Smile, blink, lift, think. No time for that; on Saturday no one thinks, we just do. Give them groceries, take their money, get these people out of here! A giant mouth, Eagle sucks in customers, chews them up, and spits them out through automatic doors that never open fast enough.

—Sheila Black

Second Assignment

Students are asked once again to create a list of images, this time drawn from some past experience. Again, focus is on just a few moments of experience. Again, detail and sensory appeal are essential. Students may now write about topics dear to them, but now perhaps with more success. Note these seemingly "large" topics focused and made concrete through detail:

Paddlin' Quetico

Tears of anger and fear evaporated in the wind as we battled the unyielding waves. A pair of bobbing loons seemed to laugh at our efforts. A clamminess set in; soggy socks sucked our wrinkled feet, and stretched out jeans rubbed against our unshaven legs. Booster shot rage flowed through our overworked arms, but we forgot the pain by alternating "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and old Girl Scout songs with loon calls and "magnificent bullmoose" stories. Aluminum clanked as we collided for another "map conference." Metal cups were dipped for fresh lake drinks. Our eyebrows lifted in delight when we discovered that after the hotdog shaped shore we'd be there. The campsite would be primitive, but we dreamed of blueberry pancakes and freeze-dried applesauce.

—Maureen Hughes

We drove up in the Oldsmobile, over the looming ribbon of dusty road blurred by heat, past the peeling painted iron gate left unattended and swinging lazily in the wind.

I stepped out of the cool air conditioning onto the dried cracking soil dotted with tufts of yellow grass and weeds. Someone shouted "Close the door!" irritated the hot air would intrude the backseat. I slammed the door, ran up onto the thick grass, lush and green, made softly fragrant by shade, and dropped against an old walnut, the bark scratching my neck.

My body ached and I could feel tears hotter than my skin blurring my eyes, my fist holding the bouquet of daisies and carnations carefully held together by an old wire twistie from a plastic sandwich bag.

I got up awkwardly, and tripped over an uneven clump of dirt camouflaged by grass. I caught my balance in front of the gray stone. I knelt down and pressed the yellow and white against the little mound, and ran my fingers slowly over the grooves of letters and dates. I could hear the Oldsmobile now, louder as it grew nearer.

My blood rushed, picked me up and pushed me back to the road. The door opened and someone shouted, "Hurry up it's hot out there!" irritated the heavy air would intrude the backseat.

We drove away in the Oldmobile, over the looming ribbon of dusty road blurred by heat, past the peeling painted iron gate left unattended and swinging lazily in the wind.

—Anne St. Germaine

Writing on the Lay-Away Plan in the Junior High

JOYCE HAZELKORN
NORTHWOOD JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
HIGHLAND PARK, ILLINOIS

"I must sit down and send that out."

"Oh my, I've owed them a letter for weeks."

How often have we said or heard this from our friends, our colleagues? Putting off writing certainly is common with adults. Why should junior high school students be different? Writing is a discipline. Disciplines are learned. Students learn to write by writing. Quantity of practice is helpful if quality is directed. On the other hand, when we teachers strongly direct the quality of our junior high school student's compositions, we are often accused of inhibiting children's "creativity." If we force them to write too often, we'll turn them away, we are told. I have no magic answers in spite of the success of many of my students.

I do, however, refuse to be intimidated. Some practices do work! For instance, I have found it helps if students keep a journal. Asking them to record on a daily basis what they feel or see helps make them more aware of the world about them. The day book can then serve as reference when they're looking for ideas for composition. Youngsters in primary grades who have so much to say in front of a "show and tell" class are much more inhibited in their writing in junior high. Journal entries can supply the seed for much later writing.

I try to make each writing assignment arise from classroom discussion. Sometimes we just look out the window and talk about what we see. Other times we share ideas from our day books. We may go on to discuss admirable characteristics of people, study photographs and paintings, or listen to music. Talking about stories may lead to writing. We make lists, ask questions, and write down answers. Whatever device is used, a great deal of oral discussion takes place in the class period before we write.

Usually, the first topic I choose for composition is "Feelings of a Family." It's easier for students to open up when they write about

something they know. They generally get lots of ideas from our discussions of the annoyances and joys they find at home. But whatever they decide to focus on, I emphasize, "Be there!" Whether they choose to tell about a family shopping trip, a day at the zoo, or a visit to a haunted house, I insist that they "be there" already when they start to write. The tendency of the student is to give a lengthy introduction and then devote only one or two sentences at the end of a composition on the actual topic. The reading of examples of student compositions I have collected from other classes helps to emphasize this.

The next step involves the use of my layaway plan. When their papers are turned in to me, I don't look at them. Instead I put them aside on "layaway." We have done our creating. I hold their compositions from two days to a week and then return them, still unread, to be rewritten and turned in again for grading. By the time they receive their layaways, what they have previously written has grown cold. It sounds different. The constant student comment is, "That isn't what I meant!" Sometimes we trade papers and they get the reactions of fellow students.

When papers are returned from layaway, I provide each student with a "paragraph plan" to be used as a guideline for their revision. The plan requires students to consider such questions as: Did you follow your original outline? Is the composition written in an orderly fashion? Is the topic specific? Does the topic sentence suggest the general topic and state the specific topic? Does it arouse the reader's interest? Does it follow proper order either in time, place or importance? Have you limited yourself to one idea? Do sentences flow? Are you making good use of transitional words? Are you employing comparison and contrast? Are you using figures of speech? Are you being too wordy or trite? Are your sentences varied? Are statements supported with concrete detail?

At this point, the students, now more objective, rewrite and turn in the compositions, this time for a grade. They have checked their grammar, usage, spelling and punctuation and they have considered the advice of their classmates.

I don't claim that this layaway plan is a panacea. It doesn't work with every writer. However, as the year progresses, the plan does reach successfully more and more students. They seem to be more critical when they return to their writing after several days. For me, it has been a method that produces the best essays that these junior high students are capable of writing.

Two Techniques for "Producing" Student Writers

KATHERINE MERVIS
EVANSTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

The word "producing" often conjures up two dissimilar images for me. One is of little elves busily making whimsical-looking shoes. The other is of a Zero Mostel or Groucho Marx gleefully plotting a lavish Broadway extravaganza that seems doomed to disaster but miraculously becomes a hit. While neither image may seem to have any relation to the production of good student writing, I think that both do. The first evokes the actual process of writing and the second serves as the incentive, the recognition, for all of the hard work that goes into good writing.

In other words, if we want to produce award-winning student writers, we should teach the process, hopefully providing them with the necessary tools and inspiration, and we should put their names in lights whenever possible. We must make this most solitary and sedentary of all of the arts as ego-satisfying as we can.

I have attempted to approach the teaching of creative writing with just such a focus: writing as a process and writing as something that should be published and/or (better yet) performed.

WRITING AS A PROCESS

When I teach creative writing as a separate course rather than as a part of a general English course, I have the luxury of being able to spend a good deal of time presenting the students with an abundance of materials and strategies. However, any of the materials and strategies listed below can be adapted to fit into a general English curriculum:

I. Materials
   A. Text—Norton and Gretton, *Writing Incredibly Short Plays, Poems, Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972)
   B. Professional writing samples to show:
      1. Tone
      2. Mood
      3. Style
      4. Language
   C. Films
      1. Films that stimulate creativity

2. Dramatizations of plays, poems, and stories
3. Interviews of writers and poets

D. Recordings of plays, poems, and stories
E. Writers' Showcase Idea Sheet (see Recognition for Writing)

II. Strategies
A. Exposure to examples of good writing
B. Exercises to stimulate creative thinking
C. Some open-ended assignments
D. Specific assignments with specific goals
E. Step-by-step process emphasized for each assignment
F. Keeping journals
G. Peer evaluation of writing (anonymity maintained when requested by authors)
H. Revisions emphasized
I. Incentives
1. Writing Contests
2. Student performances of writing
a. Class oral interpretation
b. Writers' Showcase

RECOGNITION FOR WRITING

Students are encouraged to obtain clarity, sophistication, and originality in their writing when they are rewarded for doing so. They derive particular pleasure from seeing their words stand up to competition, from reading them in a literary magazine or journal, or from hearing them performed by their peers in a school production. At Evanston Township High School, we strongly encourage students to enter writing contests, we publish some of the best writing in our school literary magazine, *Evanescence*, and we perform it in a production known as Writers' Showcase. As one of the faculty sponsors for Writers' Showcase, I have witnessed the high degree of enthusiasm with which many aspiring student writers have responded to our plea for creative pieces for our show.

What is Writers' Showcase? It is a student performed, oral interpretation production of student writing. The following time line and student job descriptions were prepared by two previous sponsors, David Foote and Jacqueline Pettiford:

Time Line for a Writers' Showcase Production

Sept. —Select Board

Oct. —Choose a general theme (Theme should be general enough so that *any* piece of writing will fit, yet specific enough to give focus to the show and di-

rection to writers. Examples of themes we have used in the past: "As I grew older", "Time", "Doorways", "Conundrums", "Faces".)

—*or* avoid limiting students to theme (see Idea Sheet-1982)

—Create idea sheet for English teachers (See sheet)

—Begin planning for Writers' Showcase Week—Assign "*Nudges*".

Nov. —Publicity for Showcase Week

—Showcase Week (First week in Dec?)
English teachers publicize showcase and assign writing.
Fund raising projects as necessary (bake sales, donut sales).
Class visits by last years' cast to give examples of Showcase.

Dec. —Begin screening material

Jan. —Selection of material continues

—Remind teachers to submit more material for show! Remind them of the VARIETY you need.

—Announcements in Daily Bulletin about material and how to submit.

Feb. —Continue above!

March —Compile final script (20-30 pieces, maximum of 1 hr. 15 mins.)

—Get script typed on dittos

—Send notices to English teachers telling them names of students whose work will *probably* be in final show. (Some last min. cuts are inevitable.)

—Plan how material will be staged; get slides and music needed.

—Board writes opening and closing material, if necessary (for unity)

—Get posters to printer (This should be done early!)

—Select cast (open tryouts)
publicize tryouts
select material to be read at tryouts—rejected material or works by known authors

—Rehearsals begin

April Week #1—Finalize staging (order of pieces; use of slides and music)

—Ditto tickets (different color paper for each performance; 50¢ for afternoon shows; $1.00 for evening shows)

—put up posters

—REHEARSAL!

Week #2—Start selling tickets (Eng. teachers and cast members). (We have two sponsors for Showcase. One of us handles all tickets with the help of a student ticket chairman.)

—REHEARSAL!

Week #3—Opening!

—Tech. Rehearsal Monday

—Dress Rehearsal Tuesday

—Shows Thursday, Friday, Saturday

May —Take a deep breath! Select Director and Producer for next year's show.

Breakdown of Production costs:

Dittos for script—	
Paper (colored) for tickets—	
Posters—(We use school print shop)	$ 30.00 (75 posters)
Programs—(We type a clean copy and then send it to an offset shop. You can always ditto programs.)	25.00 (500)
Slides—(film and developing)	25.00 (estimated)
	$ 80.00 total
Estimated receipts from four performances	$120.00
	$ 40.00 profit

Writers' Showcase—Job Descriptions

An oral interpretation approach to 'publishing' student writing!

Involve the students!

Board of Directors. The Board is primarily responsible for the selection of material for the show. This entails many hours of work after school and at home. We generally meet once a week from December to January and twice a week from February through April.

Board members should be creative and enjoy writing. Often the Board edits the work of other students. They may also be called on to write original material as needed.

Board members are also responsible for many of the tedious tasks that are so important to the success of the show. These tasks include helping to promote *Writers' Showcase Week*, participating in fund raising projects, painting signs, putting up posters, etc.

The Director and Producer of next year's Showcase are chosen from this year's Board.

The Director. The Director is responsible for the artistic aspects of the show and as such must have a strong foundation in writing and in oral interpretation or theater. He/she is the major organizer of the show and therefore must be dependable and *well organized!*
The Director must maintain close ties with the Board, the sponsors and the producer. He/she must not be so totally over-extended with other commitments that there is insufficient time for weekly meetings.
The Director organizes: —Writer's Showcase Week
—collection of material from teachers
—Board meetings to sort and select material
—script compilation
—tryouts and callbacks
—rehearsal schedules
Along with the sponsors, the Director has a major responsibility for the following:
—selection of material
—presentation of material
—casting
—staging

The Producer. The Producer must have the ability to anticipate the needs of the show. He/she must be dependable, well organized and willing to work at often rather tedious tasks of organization and production. The Producer must have a strong foundation in writing and/or oral interp. although proficiency in both is not as important as the ability to 'get things done!'
The Producer is directly responsible to the sponsors and the Director. He/she will be in charge if the director is absent.
The Producer is an important member of the board and, according to his/her abilities will be involved in choice of material and/or casting. The Producer is in charge of co-ordinating (and finding people to fill) all positions in:
—publicity (programs, poster, tickets, art work, etc.)

—technical crew
—photography
—music (and other sound problems!)

For Help with Oral Interpretation

Charlotte Lee's text, *Oral Interpretation*
All's Fair in Love and War, a recording of poems by various authors. Terry Borton, Joan and Norman Newberg, (readers)
Education Activities, Inc.
Freeport, L.I. N. Y.

A Few Dicta

ALVA W. LOWEY
LAKE FOREST HIGH SCHOOL

Considering the question of how to develop prize winning manuscripts, I assert that the *sine qua non* is a classroom of talented students. As the teacher of a senior honors elective course at Lake Forest High School, I have been fortunate to get exceptionally fine students who are a well trained, talented, confident and resilient lot—ambitious to write, at least in the classroom. During a year, they produce from ten to fifteen manuscripts which seem to be of contest calibre. To gear them up for this kind of writing, I have developed a process of teaching and guidance which I offer as a few dicta in full knowledge that there are as many ways to conduct a writing class as there are teachers.

I keep my students writing briskly, one story every two weeks throughout the semester, with formal periods designated at the end of each quarter as re-write times. I do not see the point of re-writing for its own sake, but when I get stories from students which seem to be in top form, I begin what amounts to a selling job, convincing them that what they have written is better than they know. If we go on in this belief, the stories continue to grow in an organic way. Revisions which are merely tamperings are destructive, in my view; revisions which are soundings for the depth of an idea are extensions of the creative process. I have a good memory for the contents of a student's file of work, and keep up a running conversation, the student's word might be hassle, in my effort to keep interest alive in the best pieces. I do not have to tell my colleagues that revision goes against the student's grain; when the idea is down on paper, it is done, finished, said. It takes time, and a large charge of enthusiasm, to convince a student of a story's potential as art.

I do not like to accept rewritten pieces in lieu of current assignments, although sometimes I do. The work in progress is what gives the whole class its tone, its morale; too much emphasis on individual musings results in a psychological sag. The conception of a new story, and the re-working of one already drafted can and should go on concurrently. As writers uncover the promise of a drafted story, work on the new one is increasing their fluency, sharpening their style and their judgment.

I keep a batch of stories a week, a reading time that is the result of a practiced eye, and I must confess, opinionated stance. I hand them back with written comments, usually suggestions for tightening or otherwise improving the structure. Although the student and I may ultimately get to questions of word choice or style, these matters pertain to the type of polishing for which we are not yet ready, and which is often expendable.

It goes without saying that a manuscript whose style is badly damaged by excesses such as sentimentality, hyperbole, or flippancy, is a poor candidate for revision, for its problem is in its voice. Very few students can endure rejection of voice, or profit by criticism which picks it to pieces. What seem excesses are often the result of a mind set which only time can alter. There are always one or two writers in the grip of passion and about their lovelorn output absolutely nothing can be done.

Structural flaws typical of young writers are easy to see. An agile blue pencil can mark for the author internalized musing, travel log descriptions, false starts, and dead ends. As easy to see, but not to correct, are gross summaries, often in the critical rising action or climax, which need segmental building. Stories of suspense almost always need structural replacements for reiterative insistence on being scared, so scared, and awfully scared. By far the most common problem, and the most interesting to solve, is that of the incomplete story—the case of the missing denouement. Because this kind of story comes from the author who has not thought a plot through to its consequences, the solution requires fresh imagination, and at its most complex, engages the talent of the whole class.

An ex-student recently paid me the rare and exhilarating compliment that the creative writing class had permanently affected his writing. With this article in mind, I dared to press my luck. I asked him how. He mentioned two things, which happily for me are the two things which I think a writing class can do for almost all its students: its discussions had sensitized him to detail, and had showed him how to think through to the end of his plots.

A humbling fact is that prize-winning manuscripts tend to come in early in the course. They seem to have written themselves at the first

depression of the key. It takes no second sight to recognize these stories. They have an emotional urgency which is steady and unrelenting. Sometimes a story may begin with this urgency, and when I feel it on the wane, I am conscious of racing toward the end, as if I can outrun its disappearance. I have never seen a student infuse this quality into a story through rewriting, although I have sometimes seen the quality destroyed by that process.

Prize-winning manuscripts, or I should say, publishable ones, ones which speak to the broad range of readers, are overwhelmingly autobiographical. Although they almost always contain fictional elements, I can think of only two completely fictional winners. The first was a science fiction piece called "New Semester," (*Illinois English Bulletin*, 1972). The author was convinced, as students who believe themselves headed for professional writing often are, that biographical writing is not "real writing." In 1974 appeared the only student of mine to share both his view and his success. His piece, "The Great Sphinx," (*Illinois English Bulletin*, April, 1975) was a fantasy with archeological underpinnings. As a rule fictional stories, often fine personal accomplishments, are not successful in objective terms. The young author is likely to have derived plot, and sometimes style, from such authors as Asimov, Vonnegut, Tolkien, or Bradbury, or to have written a version of a movie or TV formula.

Autobiography, on the other hand, is a comfortable starting place for a young writer. Seniors are naturally retrospective and evaluative. I do everything I can by way of classroom discussion and activity to concentrate their minds on specific experiences: these experiences have rudimentary plot, retrievable imagery, and emotion dug out of a mother lode. As I hinted in my unkind cut at the lovelorn, a writer's control is better, and inhibitions fewer, when the experience is distant. Even as do their mentors, these young writers have intimations of mortality and are often preoccupied with loss of friends, grandparents, parents, of that time of life which now seems to have been idyllic. Their stories have a durable importance; as many times as I read and reread them, they never fail to affect me with a power I ascribe to art.

"Do We Get to Write Today?": A Report From a Small-Town School

Rosemary Randolph
Macomb Senior High School

Getting a publishable essay or story from students in a small school can be a keen pleasure, but it cannot be counted upon as an assured product of a given semester's work. We haven't enough students at Macomb High School to be able to offer ambitious creative writing courses. We must work composition into our program as well as we can and hope for the best. Just a change of student attitude can be gratifying, and an occasional contest winner is like getting icing on the cake.

My ideas for teaching writing then have evolved from experience with students of varying abilities within a small-school curriculum, students whose response to a composition assignment is usually an imploring question, "Do we *have* to write today?" Although I have not come up with anything revolutionary or new to change their minds about writing, I have formulated a philosophy which can be condensed into four basic suggestions. 1) A great deal of reading and writing, no matter what the class; 2) As much individual teacher-help as possible; 3) An empathetic atmosphere; and 4) Classical music in the classroom. Obviously, these ideas are not innovative nor profound, but I believe they work. Sometimes.

My students in literature classes have been heard to complain, "I didn't know we had to *write* in this class; I thought we were just gonna *read*." They soon learn such is not the case. I believe that writing, reading, and grammar (though not "formal" grammar study) are inseparable, inherent parts of "English," and thus my students in composition, creative writing, thanatology, and journalism (plus whatever other courses I've taught in the past) write—at least once a week and preferably more. Some never like it; some merely tolerate it; some progress only to the point of not writing fragments and run-ons. Others see that although it is indeed hard work, they do have something worthwhile to say, and perhaps the result enables them to communicate in words something that will give more meaning not only to their readers' lives, but to their own. Depending on many things, I grade some papers and do not grade others. However, almost without fail, those I do grade are returned with comments the following day.

I like to read student papers to the class, and it is particularly rewarding to be able to use as an example of good writing a paper

from a student who is not particularly proficient in English but who, because he has liked a topic and felt strongly about it, has produced a noteworthy essay. A case in point is a student who wrote a character sketch of his grandfather. In terms of grades, this student was average, and he certainly didn't know much about punctuation, sentence structure, and all the other refinements of good writing. But he did know how to touch his readers when he described his grandfather's fingers as "yellow-stained from twenty years of smoking unfiltered cigarettes" and his barn looking like "a patchwork quilt of lumber." Another student, who surely set a record for the number of misspelled words in a single paper, brought awesome quiet to the room and tears to the eyes of her listeners with her poignant account of the death of her best friend. As they heard these and other papers, my classes began to see that writing honestly and clearly and meaningfully was indeed possible—and expected. As students continue to write regularly and to share their writing with an empathetic audience, they begin to see the strength and power and beauty of words, and eventually they know I expect them to say, "Do we *get* to write today?" instead of "Do we *have* to write today?"

In addition to writing often, individual help is vital. I do not like to spend class time explaining grammatical rules to an entire class; some students (a few, at least) already know the rules, even if they don't always apply them; others, as every teacher knows, couldn't care less. But on a one-to-one basis, with their paper in front of us on the desk, they are forced to confront their errors, and I will not let them leave until I have at least made them see what they're doing wrong and have in mind some idea of how to correct it. I also require them to keep a chart on which they record the date of the paper, its title, and a list of errors (everything from logic to spelling) they have made. Before they hand in another paper, they are to check the chart so that their errors will not be repeated. This seems to me to be a particularly effective way to combat misspelled words. This individual help requires, in addition to time, both tact and patience. A teacher must know how to approach students; do they need to be handled softly and carefully, or do they need to be goaded? Will a sense of humor, a "light touch" do the job, or is a heavier hand needed? Sometimes, a teacher instinctively knows; at other times, she guesses and hopes. In any event, she knows she must word criticism with care.

Sometimes, for whatever reason, students will not believe their work is good, and a teacher must try to instill confidence in them. A few years ago I pleaded with a student to enter a short piece of his writing in a writing competition, but he insisted his essay had little merit. I nagged him for days and at last persuaded him to revise it; finally, on the day of deadline, he showed me the final version. I

suggested still more revision, and he struggled for another hour, seeking the precise language he wanted. Not totally satisfied, he nevertheless typed his essay and allowed me to mail it to the writing contest. The story has a happy ending: he won. Now a senior in college (and majoring, unfortunately, in engineering instead of English), he grins when he stops in to visit and asks me if I remember the time I pushed him into entering a writing contest. As if I could forget.

No matter how good the curriculum, the textbook, the school's physical facilities, the abilities of students, and a myriad of other factors, the eventual success of a course depends upon the teacher. In writing, especially, a teacher needs to be genuinely interested, enthusiastic, and totally convinced of the utter necessity of teaching writing to all students. Many teachers will occasionally submit their own writing to their students to evaluate; it was with indescribable trepidation that I did that with this paper. But this is one way to feel the fear and vulnerability all novice writers experience when allowing another to read what they have written. Tell me a better way to understand how students feel when they write for a teacher.

Finally, my last "rule" for teaching writing is to play classical music during class. The first time I tried this, the response included raised eyebrows, questioning looks, giggles, and hints about my mental state, all of which I cheerfully ignored. I was then given suggestions: "How about some Stones?" and "Can I bring my Who records in?" I explained that vocal or loud music interfered with the creative process but agreed to consider "quiet" instrumentals. This led to "Ice Castles" and "Somewhere in Time," both of which my students have repeatedly asked to hear again and again.

Then there was the time I was busily grading papers while my students wrote; the record had ended, and without thinking, I turned it over, set the needle down, and returned to my desk. Suddenly the air was filled with the sounds of clashing cymbals and booming cannons; inadventently, I had put on the *1812 Overture*. I dashed toward the record player, all the while apologizing for the disruption. After the laughter had subsided, the class insisted that I leave the record on. "What is it? We like it; it's great!" they exclaimed. I told them something of the background of the composer and the music—an unexpected, added bonus. And for days afterward, they cheerfully wrote to the *1812*. (So much for my theory about loud music.) In any event, I have found that classical music is calming, soothing, and perhaps even inspirational. It quiets the classroom and seems to increase students' ability to concentrate. If I fail to put on a record, I can be sure my students will either remind me or do it themselves. And after awhile, they seem to forget about the Stones and seem perfectly content with Beethoven and Bach.

So—how do I teach writing? I assign writing at least weekly, and I insist that all students not only discuss each completed assignment with me, but that they correct and/or revise their papers and keep a record of their errors. I hope I convey my enthusiasm for teaching writing and my respect for students who work hard at it. I believe music provides a quiet atmosphere conducive to serious attention to writing. This approach requires an enormous amount of time, but I believe, without question, the results are well worth it. Most of the time!

Mayhem, Models and Masterpieces: A Department's Pooling of Practices

Jeanne Claeys Patricia Davis
On Behalf Of
Fellow Faculty Members
Guilford High School
Rockford, Illinois

> The walls of the cave close around the boy, and in the darkness the cougar bides his time. . . .
>
> They had released her; she was well they said, but how could she cope with no boundaries, no guidelines, no security? . . .
>
> The car loaded with faceless teens had to be going 107 mph! He would never make it across the WALK sign; he would be crushed under the speeding wheels. . . .
>
> The ticking of the clock—the vision of the smirking face would drive him to desperate measures to save his reputation . . .

These critical moments could occur in literary masterpieces or in soap operas, but the business of the English teacher is to inspire them to occur, as these did, in the creative prose of high school students.

According to Thomas Edison, inspiration is only five percent of any creative battle and the rest is hard work. In English classes, teachers must supply much of the work—at least, at first. They must provide the ninety-five percent tangibles if they are to avoid dull characters, "he said—she said" dialogue, and the "then I woke up" endings. Effective tools in the preliminary stages of the student writing process can

be provided by getting ideas from creative writing texts and examples from the literature being studied. Also vital are specific suggestions on a one-to-one basis. A booklet much in use at Guilford High School is "Writing from the Inside," by James Houston, for it provides particularly helpful sections on words, people, struggles, and the all-important stages: "getting started" and "getting it finished." Also useful is the recording of Houston's own short story, "The Parking Tower," and his personal commentary which accompanies the text.

Many teachers at Guilford prefer to use the literature currently being studied, as models for writing. Students in American literature might be asked to read Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" and several Poe short stories. Focusing on the author's handling of horror or grotesque, the students can then read tales like Welty's "A Visit of Charity," Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," and Porter's "He." After a discussion of Poe's stories and the more modern ones, the students can be asked to select an effect they wish to achieve and write a two-or-three sentence description of the plot and main characters in the light of that effect.

Imitation of style also provides students with needed writing preparation. After the students have studied selections from Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Hemingway and Faulkner, one Guilford teacher establishes a situation such as a man fishing by a stream or a girl visiting her grandmother and asks the students to imitate the style of the authors as each would respond to that situation. The students are limited to a maximum of two pages for each author and must make each response clearly identifiable without identifying the author being imitated. Later their responses to the given situation are used to form the basis for writing their own short stories.

English literature offers the same model possibilities. For instance, in an in-depth analysis of the "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*, students can be asked to note the physical descriptions (size, coloring, individual traits), the clothes, the horses, the affectations of the characters. Chaucer's deliberate omissions of traits, the importance he gives small details (lisp), and his use of irony provide the students with techniques for their own satirical prose pieces. The close study of Swift's "A Modest Proposal" offers another model for satire and a perfect opportunity for students to express some modern proposals they have been quietly nurturing. Once students have studied models, they are better prepared to compose their own creative prose.

Perhaps the most important help the student can receive is the teacher's personal advice and guidance in a one-to-one situation on a half-formulated idea the student brings in. By prodding, questioning, suggesting, and reading aloud, the teacher can lead the young writer to a deeper character portrayal, a more intricate plot, a more natural

dialogue, and a more sensitive description. Techniques at Guilford vary, but all involve step-by-step processes.

One teacher, for example, used the following techniques with his freshmen in teaching them to write short stories. After his freshmen had read and discussed the basic elements of half a dozen short stories (from *Fiction I* text, Macmillan series), they studied the chapter on the use of quotation marks from Warriner's *English Workshop, Course Three*. While studying this chapter, they reexamined the short stories they had read and noted the sections of dialogue they especially liked in preparation for dialogue they would soon be writing.

Next the teacher prepared his students to write action passages. He showed them several samples from Hogrefe's *The Process of Creative Writing*, Chapter 2, "The Feel of an Experience." Once the students had discussed these samples, noting that good writers use similes, metaphors, and vivid sense impressions, they composed paragraphs designed to show experiences. The teacher read aloud those paragraphs which were particularly effective.

The next step in the process was to show the students how to blend details of action with dialogue to develop characterization. The teacher showed his students a page of dialogue and action that he had written and asked them to determine what important trait the character's action and dialogue showed. The next assignment was to write a one-page character portrayal which combined action and dialogue. The teacher then read their compositions aloud and asked the students to identify the traits. If the class could identify the trait, the author received an A, provided there was a blend of dialogue and action.

After these preliminary exercises, the students wrote short stories of three-to-five pages, using the basic elements of the short stories they had discussed in their short story unit and blending vivid action and dialogue into their creations. Each student made two copies of this short story. One copy, identified by title and author, was placed along with all the others in a large envelope; the other copy, identified only by title, was read and evaluated by the class. As the students read each other's stories, they kept notes on those they liked best. After everyone had read the stories, the students voted by secret ballot for the ones they considered best. The top three writers received peer recognition, and the teacher credited the students with helping him choose stories to enter in other writing contests.

Another Guilford teacher used the following techniques with her juniors in teaching them to write short stories: After the juniors had read, analyzed, and compared a variety of American short stories, they planned their own. First they wrote one-paragraph sketches of their main characters. The teacher explained that an author needs to know the main characters, their chief traits, their physical traits, their

past, their present, and even whether they roll the toothpaste up from the bottom or squeeze it from the top. The teacher responded to and graded these character sketches.

Then the students wrote the first paragraphs of their stories. The teacher explained that the short story writer must decide what the main artistic aim is: a character trait, an idea, a mood, etc.

She suggested they might start with a mood or psychological attitude (loneliness, love of city, etc.), an environment (doctor's office, store, etc.), or a type (science fiction, fantasy, etc.). The students read each other's introductory paragraphs and evaluated them, expressing interest or a lack thereof in reading the rest of the story.

Next the students wrote plot outlines of their short stories. After the teacher had responded to their outlines, the students wrote rough drafts with the help of a check-list which included such questions as: 1) Will the title of the story be interesting before and meaningful after one has read the story? 2) How much have I told the reader in the first sentence? In the first paragraph? 3) Where is the emphasis in the story: character, plot, theme, or atmosphere? (All are important, and though one is emphasized, all should work together for unity.) 4) Is there action enough in the story? (Mental and emotional activity is, of course, as important as physical.) 5) Has each scene in the story a function? What is it? 6) What is the decisive moment in the story, the moment of truth, the moment which implies the total meaning of the story? 7) How about grammar and punctuation? 8) DOES THE STORY *SHOW* AND NOT TELL???!!!

A week later, the students turned in their final copies. They exchanged papers, read two of their classmates' stories, and commented on the grades they had given them. The last step, of course, was the teacher evaluation.

Regardless of time and effort expended by teachers, problems in writing creative prose persist. The process is time consuming, and there are other units to teach (*Julius Caesar*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Macbeth*, grammar, usage, mechanics, the essay, the term paper, etc., etc.). The same unit taught different years brings different results. The attention span and self-discipline of high school students are limited; they will tolerate only so much of a unit before they abandon it. In addition, an average writer may not be able to compose a "great" or even "good" short story. As one teacher commented: "The 'great' story does not come from anything I do except provide the opportunity. Students bring their own gifts to the assignment. Some cannot write a great short story, just as I cannot play the piano, but I can learn a degree of technical skill—and so can they!"

With teacher help, most students *can* learn to write good if not great creative prose. When they bring uncertain ideas or tattered rough

drafts to an assignment, perhaps they can be guided to stories that exude the hot breath of the cougar and the frantic desperation of the mentally unstable. Perhaps one student can bring alive in his misery that boy who has spent "his third rough week in the second grade" and who now fears crossing alone a street lined with speeding cars. Perhaps another can manage to express the terror the procrastinator feels facing the lurking sneer of Miss Phesant, who has assigned a short story. "Perhaps they can" can become "Yes, they can," for the excerpts mentioned at the beginning and end of this article are all parts of prize-winning stories written by Guilford students.

Writing Creatively: A Potpourri of Ideas For Enlivening Exposition

Geoffrey R. Butler
Visiting Teaching Associate
Department of English, University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign

Not to split hairs, but I see a clear difference between "creative writing" and "writing creatively." I would guess that most contributions to a journal with the theme of "creative prose writing" would concern themselves primarily with short stories, probably as taught in a specific creative writing class. As I have never taught such a course, I prefer to discuss techniques to aid students in writing creatively. Thus, while some of the following will concern short story writing, most of the content will center on essays, and sometimes even on expository essays. Students surviving my writing course in high school seem to win more than their share of awards, so perhaps I am quibbling—indeed, splitting hairs.

While we necessarily talk about students having goals for their essays, it is equally important for teachers to have clearly defined goals for their creative writing assignments, aside from fulfilling the short story or satire requirement in the curriculum. I find that defining "creative" for myself leads to the goals for my assignments. Over the years I have developed a list of seven words describing my expectations about what I will teach and how my students will respond and grow: originality—imagination—flexibility—perception—fluency—curiosity—elaboration. I give my writing classes this list, and we discuss each word's meaning. By the time we arrive at mutually agreeable definitions, the atmosphere of the class has already begun to be established.

I do think the atmosphere created in a writing class is vital. I find that if I desire creative writing, I had better be creative. I must, in fact, take the list of seven terms to heart myself. Moreover, I should work on this atmosphere from the first day—and keep it up every class thereafter, as long as energy and ideas remain.

I would like to make clear the difference between being creative and being entertaining. Entertainment is just to pass the time and to halt vandalism, incipient rebellion, and various acts against the peace. Creativity is designed to further the specific goal of the moment. Class motivation increases according to the energy and creativity of the instructor. The process may be highly entertaining as a byproduct, of course.

Therefore, I have a bag of tricks to jolt student mental routines. One principle that works well—with both high and low groups, incidentally—is that of forcing thought about the familiar in a new and unusual way. I have several exercise lists similar to the following example: "Which is deeper, a hole or loneliness?" or "Which is bluer, the sky or a person's eyes?" Such unusual juxtapositions force students' thinking out of the everyday rut.

Another example concerns describing a specific occurrence concretely: the sound of rain on an automobile roof, or walking through mud barefoot. I sometimes have my students blindfolded: they must describe a sound, or an object by touch. Another trick is to have them describe a person in the class, seeing if the rest can figure out which person. Forbidding any direct physical description eliminates bright red sweaters and the like. (I must add: a certain amount of discretion is advisable.)

If the class is trustworthy—and with the correct atmosphere it probably will be—we may go outside and describe concretely, using all five senses, some object: a pine needle, a puddle, or plain, old, unsmokeable grass. At times, I have them describe a featureless area in the school so that the rest of the class recognizes it. Should we be working on a short story, perhaps on dialogue, I make sure to read dramatically and act out scenes; sometimes they will as well. Miming simple actions (getting a glass of water; putting a pie in the oven) forces them to think specifically and concretely.

The point is to show you care—care about writing, care about using the language, care about the class. I try to challenge my students, and show them that a challenge is more fun than taking the dull and easy approach. I guess what I am really saying is: you too have to follow the seven-word list. You too have to be imaginative, flexible, perceptive and so on.

Before specifying techniques for teaching writing creatively, one further principle must be mentioned: establishing personal contact

with your students. Writing creatively, whether it is in the sense of poetry, short stories and drama, or simply more thoughtful and creative essays, is threatening for student writers. They feel they are exposing themselves and could get hurt. I have found it important to reduce threats as far as possible—whether it be the temptations of the sarcastic comment, the injudiciously phrased criticism, thoughtless classmate reactions, or just being too dominating in the classroom. I discuss their potential fears openly with them, allowing for plenty of reaction.

Additionally, I try to respond to their work every single time, and fairly quickly. Other than with the most complex of assignments, any impact the response may have on their learning is greatly diminished after about a week. I have read comment after comment in professional journals about late papers, failure to respond to oral or in-class work, or, on the other side, praise and wonderment at receiving papers back quickly.

On a practical level, my students' learning is greater if I can force myself to respond every time with speed. I actually tested this in two classes one term: one group received responses on every bit of work almost immediately; the other sometimes had long delays, as I found it convenient to make corrections. Although both classes began the term as approximate equals in their first impromptu writings, the class I responded to was writing far more maturely in their final impromptus—from grammar and spelling to imaginative idea conception.

One aid in establishing rapport is through the judicious use of the much maligned journals. I do not have my students keep daily journals because I cannot read them every day. I also do not wish to have five entries made the morning before they are handed in. Thus I assign only what I can answer. With once a week, say, journal entries, I receive more genuine and thoughtful entries, and can be a bit more forceful in responding to the obviously hasty ones. I also do not correct the grammar or writing of their journals unless asked—both because it lessens the threat to them and because if I only respond to content, I save enough time to complete the job.

I ask my students to write once a week on a "great thought" or "imaginative daydream." I explain that I am not really interested in their drinking or dating habits. I tell them: although no individual entry will be graded, the journal as a whole will be, based on apparent effort. For once they can receive a strong grade regardless of ability if they try. I suggest practicing various styles and experimental ideas in their entries. If they desire specific comments on some aspect of their writing, they should ask for them.

Overall, I have found the journals to be exceptionally successful. Not only is rapport established with individuals, but sometimes I

receive astonishingly strong writing. Responding is not always easy; some days I just do not care as I should. However, the results have been in the main very much worth the effort.

Perhaps the single most difficult area for the student writer (any writer would be more accurate) is getting started. "But I don't have any imagination; I don't know what to write" has to be the single complaint I receive the most. Thus I have developed a series of starter exercises.

One technique is to use some of the stunts previously listed. A fine essay can grow out of "Which is deeper, a hole or loneliness?" Such contrasting thoughts on a single word seem to inspire the creative fire in students. I am also a believer in lists. My immediate response to "I don't know what to write" is to tell the student to make up a list. They answer "But what do I start the list with?" often with an "I've got you now" gleam in their eye. I merely tell them to begin writing "I don't know what to write." Ten repetitions of this phrase and the brain will revolt, a genuine list of potential ideas begins to flow.

I have a few starter exercises for both in and out of class. One is to have my students take a word or phrase—I usually begin with a concrete, easy one, such as "ice cream sundae"—and divide it into three areas for discussion. If the class is in a short story unit, I have them create the basis of a plot around the phrase. Sometimes I give five minutes in class for their breakdown; then they read what they came up with for class comment. I suggest a friend or classmate could give them words to do at home for practice, and that I would be glad to glance over their efforts and briefly comment.

Similarly, I may ask my class to take an apparently insignificant event or object and suggest on paper its relevance to something greater—the principle of expansion. I might choose a single beer can alongside the highway, to give an obvious example. The opposite also works well. Take some huge happening and reduce it to its essentials. If we are working on a short story, I have them create characters through answering a series of very specific questions. I ask: "What is their favorite food?" "What chores do they detest?" "Describe their nose."

The point of the starter exercises is to work from the familiar. I find one of the most difficult concepts to get across is that writing creatively means to write from what you know. Obviously (to me), writing will have more life and impact if it seems real; it will seem more real if the writer is writing from experience. My students, on the other hand, seem to feel that if it is not abstract—the far away, long ago, and unexperienced—then it must not be creative. Thus I spend time with exercises forcing them to deal with tiny details, with writing concretely by using the familiar.

WOA. I spend much time working with my student writers on the concept of correctness for Writer, Occasion, and Audience. The three clearly interact. What one writes—the occasion or assignment—depends on the audience they are writing for. That in turn influences who they are as writers. I do quite a bit with role playing, both in the sense of narrowing down who they are as writers as well as in the sense of writer versus reader or critic. The thesis goal enters here. I explain that difficulties will arise in establishing an intelligent thesis goal if they are not aware of the particulars of WOA. Contrarily, by being specific about WOA beforehand, the thesis goal sometimes narrows itself.

Exercises work here too. I might assign a particular audience to them with a general goal: "Write your school board a report on the strongest or weakest single aspect of your high school" seems to work well for the more expository type of essay. "Your short story is aimed at getting parents to give you more trust" might be another. The point is to have the students consider WOA as an active part of their prewriting. Discussion of appropriate tone, style, word usage and so on then becomes far easier and more understandable.

Another exercise is to have students concretely describe their audience in a separate paragraph clipped to the final draft. If the class is having difficulties with content and style, I might have them write a justification for the form, content, and even certain specifics of their papers with a particular audience in mind. We might take a single key phrase—"the family car" or "welcome home"—and discuss it from various points of view. Of course, careful consideration of writer, occasion and audience also makes the job of starting easier.

In correcting finished products of creative writing assignments, I am struck by the importance of language usage. More accurately, I mean the lack of precision and color in most early student papers. Thus, once I am receiving finished products, the terms "precision" and "exactness" tend to roll through the classroom. "Good," "great," "beautiful," "a lot" (too often "alot") and empty words of similar ilk are practically banned. While this apparently removes 50% of some students' vocabularies, without stress on word power, student writing cannot improve.

I use professional examples, picking those that stress simplicity of language with powerful and accurate usage. I use poetry (William Blake and Robert Frost both work well) and short stories (Orwell's *To Shoot an Elephant* and P. G. Wodehouse's humorous tales) and essays (Thurber, Thoreau). I don't think it matters which examples a teacher uses; the key is to show effective language usage they can understand without a dictionary. I also analyze at least one work almost word by word. I happen to have on an overhead sheet of Blake's changes in *The*

Tiger's original manuscript, the discussion generated is useful in illustrating the process of finding the "just right" word.

Once again, I have my classes do various exercises, concentrating on broadening their thinking and tuning their precision. I often give a common word—walk, or talk—and ask them to make a list of words for replacement, even if they are not an exact synonym. I keep past student essays for use on the overhead projector. Students generally do quite well in critiquing an anonymous student essay.

Other exercises include writing concrete descriptions of simple objects—some in hand, some only in the mind. I have master sheets full of inappropriate word uses which we discuss. I try to illuminate the concept of powerful, accurate word uses with comparisons—perhaps with painting, for example. I tell them that I know it is hard work, but that language effectiveness is one of the criteria for grading. I also make sure to add more effective words when correcting their papers.

I even borrow from poetry. I have become convinced over the years that use of metaphoric language—descriptions, comparisons, emotions—is a key to writing creatively. I try to be especially generous and encouraging over experiments along these lines by my student writers. Aside from poetic examples, the Hell sermon in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a powerful example to read aloud and discuss with the class. Exact words to appeal to various senses, in turn dictating a complete emotional response by the reader, is the core of the lesson. I tell them that the goal of language is to make writing real for the reader—Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief." "Beautiful" or "good" makes very little seem real.

Role playing also works well here. I break the class up into small groups, three or four per group. Each group develops a quick character description for group members. In visiting each group as they work, I choose a situation appropriate for the characters. Then each group engages in an impromptu dialogue within the situation demanded. The rest of the class jots down a character description of each member from the skit.

After the scene is completed, each member tells the class who he/she was and what the situation was. The class comments on their appropriateness. I don't jump into this cold, of course. Class rapport has to be strong, the lead-up carefully explained, and the emphasis on not personalizing comments. The results are often a break-through in detailed thought and language use by some students, and general improvement of the class as a whole.

A specialized form of creative writing much enjoyed by students is satire. The problem is that most of them do not think in terms of the indirect approach satire demands. They tend to be too obvious, direct,

even crude. Students substitute sarcasm for satire, and do not easily understand the techniques from abstract explanations and definitions. I do the usual activities: examples from professional writers and previous students as well as specific examples of each technique. I make them practice various methods separately, with specific goals and audiences in mind before tackling a complete satire. However, the most effective technique I accidentally discovered I call the "straight face" assignment.

If I am doing expository writing, I ask them to pick an absurd concept to have to prove. Then they must attempt to write a straight expository argumentative paper proving that point of view, persuading the audience to accept it. I have received topics ranging from "Blondes should become bonded servants" to "Everyone over fifty should be humanely killed" to "Pens should be eliminated."

If I am doing a straight satirical unit in creative writing, I ask them to choose the most absurd idea of actual human endeavor they can find, writing an essay where they defend it and develop it to its logical extreme. If a short story unit, I have them write using concrete characters engaging in the absurd situation they wish to satirize. The key concept is: they must write as if they believed their goal—thus, straight faced. Naturally, discussions or conferences follow, often with illumination of what satire is.

I belong to the somewhat heretical school that says: "serious expository writing need not be dull." I even attempt to teach my students to write expository essays creatively, probably with disastrous results in college. Anyway, I see three ways the serious expository essay can be enhanced with creativity.

I teach my students to use a variety of introductions and conclusions besides the normal pyramid form that leads to a straight thesis statement or paper summary. I do feel obligated to say I do teach and insist on solid formula introductions and conclusions before experimentation. I then encourage those who seem capable of more sophisticated approaches to utilize such techniques as anecdotes, dialogue, quotations, analogies, emotional or personal appeals, the startling fact or outrageous statement, and so on.

One student made the serious point that sexual innuendos in popular music are prevalent and even deleterious. The student began the essay with a short story, illustrating a scene where she was mindlessly singing a song on the car radio as she went to the store. Her younger brother asked what a certain repeated phrase in the song was. After fobbing him off with some generalized statement, she began to think about the effect of the lyrics of certain popular music. Now, nowhere was an actual thesis statement pin-pointed—but her thesis was clear. In addition, she had something to draw on for an

extended example throughout the paper as well as a reference back to tie in the conclusion. Such creativity is so much more interesting than the "In looking at popular music, one finds" kind of essay.

The other two areas for creativity in expository essays are language use and concrete examples, familiar to the reader. With the exception of specialized audiences and occasions, the most technical subject imaginable appeals more to its readership with colorful appropriate language, familiar examples, and comparisons. Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov have adequately illustrated this point in their science writings. The key I stress is audience analysis. A general, reasonably intelligent audience is ideal for adding creative writing techniques to expository essays. Obviously, some instructors will accept more creative flourishes than others; this fact is also a part of audience analysis.

A final specific technique has to do with the connection of reading to writing. I recently did an experiment with three classes in this area. I took a short story (Orwell's *To Shoot an Elephant*), a poem (Shakespeare's "That Time of Year") and an essay (Joyce's Hell sermon) and had the classes analyze them with no thought about *what* was the content, only *how* they were written. It took time—perhaps two class periods each—but the results were worth it.

Their knowledge of *what* each piece was about equalled my previously traditional approach (by theme) at its best. Equally, their knowledge of *how* these works were put together to arrive at specific goals apparently improved my students' own writing. Using impromptu essays, the ones written after the literature analysis were clearly better than the ones written just before. No other teaching of writing took place in between. The students were not given back their first impromptus until after the second ones were written. I concluded that, if taught from a *how* approach rather than a *what*, reading can improve creative writing.

Dull papers—how we all hate them. The usual recourse, however, is to teach after the mistakes have been made. I believe in trying to form stronger habits and procedures before the fact when at all possible. Not all of the previous ideas will work for any given class. However, a *flexible* approach, taught with *fluency*, *imagination* and *originality*, *elaborating* details sufficiently with a *perception* of each student's problems, will certainly aid the essential student *curiosity* for stronger creative writing. The teaching of creative writing demands the instructor teach writing creatively.

Crap Shooting and Creative Writing

MARY SASSE
CARBONDALE COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

"Once upon a time in a faraway land, there lived a princess who. . . ." So began almost every story the little girl told as she preened in front of the magical triple mirror tucked between "Ladies Dresses" and "Family Shoes" in Rossing's Grocery and Dry Goods Store. Almost every day—usually right after her mother had finished reading her a particularly good tale about a fantastic fairy godmother—the little girl managed to slip out of the family flat above the store and descend the twenty-seven steps to the magical mirror and Wonderland. There she created stories of beauty, suspense, and delight—for herself and for assorted salesladies who indulged her theatrics and even applauded on occasion.

Sometime later the little girl learned to read books for herself, but she never abandoned the story-telling habit even when she became too old to make a spectacle of herself in front of the triple mirror. She simply substituted someone else's words and a stage, legitimate vehicles for expression as everyone knows. Eventually, too, she learned something about writing—and found pleasure in composing articles about village elections and church bazaars for an ubiquitous *Evening Times*, impassioned editorials on student apathy for the school newspaper, and idealistic orations entitled "Hope in the Modern World" and "The Case Against Comic Books" for high school speech contests. On occasion, her new audiences even applauded.

Finally the day came when the girl, now grown, decided to make a career out of what she liked best—hearing, writing, telling, and reading stories. So she enrolled in courses such as "History of the English Language" and "Grammar 400" and "Teaching Methods in English." Among other things, the girl learned that

> . . . the work of the English teacher is to improve both phases [sending and receiving] of the process of communication. The English teacher assists his students in sending by teaching them the skills of writing and speaking, and he assists them in receiving by improving their ability to read and to listen. He knows that his students, to get along well in this complex world, must be able to make their meanings clear to others and understand what others are saying to them. . . . The aim of improvement of communication is both large and worthy. If attained to a considerable degree, it can do much to improve

> human understanding and to decrease man's inhumanity to man.
>
> (J. N. Hook, *The Teaching of High School English*, 2nd ed. NY: Ronald Press, 1959, p. 33)

With those worthy goals well in mind, she began her first teaching position, without a single conscious technique to make those aims into realities.

Pretty corny tale, eh? Real life "stories" often are. This one, of course, is my own. When I first began teaching, I had a wealth of personal experience (unconscious assets) and theoretical constructs (conscious assets) to play the game of teacher, but no control over my wrist action (technique) as I cast those dice. During the past fifteen years of playing the game—in the rush to make assignments, construct multiple-guess tests, and keep 100+ warm wiggly bodies in their seats doing *something* every day—I have seldom taken time to analyze more than agonizing losses. "Wins" are something else; I have revelled in them and considered them pure chance. To hedge the bets, particularly when trying to teach students to write, I have studied Macrorie, Britton, Murray, Odell, Shaughnessy, Elbow, Emig, *et al*. The odds are probably better as a result, but translating expert suggestion into practice is tricky business. So is describing one's actions in one's efforts to make students "creative" writers. On the chance that teaching students how to write is more than amateur crap-shooting, I decided to ask a former student, now a practicing journalist, how he perceived the situation.

"Harold," I wrote, "I need a favor. Can you tell me how English teachers help their students become writers? How do they help them become creative writers? What did I do—if anything—to help you along the way to publishing your first book? Be honest. (My check is enclosed.) Love. . . ."

This is Harold Koplowitz's reply:

> I don't think I'll be much help on your project. I'm pretty fatalistic when it comes to writing. It has been my experience that some people can write and most can't. Perhaps the problem is akin to "math anxiety." For some reason, early on, a lot of kids get traumatized from the experience of trying to write those first couple of "what did I do on my summer vacation" type essays, and they never really get over it.
>
> My experience was just the opposite: I still remember my first story. In about third grade we were asked to write a short story from three or four titles. I chose "The Lottery." The story I wrote was about two kids, one of whom bought

10 lottery tickets at a discount. Then they noticed that all 10 tickets had the same number on them. On the way to the lottery drawing, the wind snatched some of the tickets out of their hands. When they got to the lottery, outdoors at some fairground, the wind gusted again, but this time it blew one of the tickets into the fishbowl, and the ticket was drawn and the kids won. But on the way home, the wind blew a third time and snatched all but the money they had invested down "the open mouth of a waiting sewer." It was a damn good short story, complete with foreshadowing and an O. Henry ending, and even at the time I knew it was good. And from that moment on I was hooked on writing.

So we now have two questions: How do you teach uninterested "English anxiety" students the rudiments of technical writing, so they will be literate, if not literary; and how do you cultivate the natural talents that other students have. Luckily, with a few adjustments, the answers to both questions are either the same or non-existent. . . .

Drawing from personal experience again, there are several things that sustained my interest in writing. One of the first was starting a diary. My diary started with my adolescent love life, and that platonic relationship kept me writing daily from about 7th grade through 10th grade. I don't know what would have happened if a teacher had suggested I start one.

Another thing that helped was *Catcher in the Rye*. I'm not sure if it was just a personal preference or what, but I think it had a strong impact on me and a lot of other people, probably because the narrator is a young teenager who talks just like a teenager and has some neat things to say. It's really a crime that book is on the "moral majority" hitlist. For one thing, it provided me with what I think was a constructive role model concerning my just developing sex life . . . but I digress. . . .

One experience I think also helped was working on the school newspaper. I wish I had gotten some journalism training while in high school. I think journalism is a good thing to teach because it forces you to comprehend the difference between objective and subjective thinking. It also forces you to observe, to be skeptical, to ask questions, etc. Also, journalism is writing very short sentences, short paragraphs, and short stories.

Hmmm . . . so what did you do for me? One thing I remember about your class was the relative quality and quantity of contemporary literature. I particularly appre-

> ciate the exposure you gave me to Black literature, which in turn gave me some empathy for the Black experience. For what it's worth, I never read much of Shakespeare or Dickens that was fed to me, but I gobbled up Arthur Miller and John Knowles. I wish I had read the classics, but the fact that I didn't and the fact that I am a relatively capable writer tells me the classics are not all that important. . . . What I am saying is this: Let students read stuff they enjoy.
>
> Another thing you did for me was make me feel like a real hot s***. I was uncomfortable in the role of teacher's pet and I loved it. Again, I don't think you can write a formula for how to achieve the chemistry you and I had in that class, but if a kid for some reason is motivated to please the teacher, and if he believes the teacher thinks he is a hot s***, he'll do most anything to keep that going.
>
> Another thing is grammar and spelling. You gotta know how to do that stuff, but it has little to do with being a good writer. I can't spell worth a damn, and the grammar in my first drafts is usually atrocious. Anyway, a teacher I hated dearly had us memorize lists of 100 words at a time in sixth grade. It was drudgery, but it was from those lists that I learned such things as "all right," "lieutenant," and "warrant." Correct spelling is learned by repetition, I think.
>
> So, to sum up, I would say encourage kids to write about things they are interested in already, expose them to books that are fun to read as well as worthwhile, throw some journalism at them because it is helpful, and the more tender loving care the better.

Well, Harold, thank you for your honesty and your perceptiveness. Because you said not one word about anyone "teaching" you how to write, I think you would agree with Gwendolyn Brooks' comment. In an interview with Paul Angle, her former poetry teacher, she said, "A teacher cannot create a poet. But . . . a teacher can oblige the writing student to write!" ("Our Miss Brooks," *Chicago Tribune*, Sec. 9, 28 March 1982, p. 15). That third grade teacher and I both obliged you to write, Harold, although I suspect your story-telling urge was pretty well-developed before we came along. "Once upon a time" and all that.

The "tender loving care" part is what Bernard Percy, among others, calls providing a comfortable, supportive classroom atmosphere. He says that writers must experience success and appreciation rather than anxiety and failure (*The Power of Creative Writing*, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981). I think the success must be both personal and public; the creator feels a certain personal pleasure as his own audience—and if

even one little old saleslady applauds, the pleasure quotient rises geometrically. What I'm getting at—and you obviously understand—is the sharing and caring principle, otherwise known as the communication process, by which a stimulus-response situation is put into play. I'm happy I was there to make assignments to which you could respond creatively and to which I could react appreciatively. Howard Nemerov must be right. At a recent workshop in a nearby college, he said, "Teaching is a process trying to look like a result." Or a little bit like crap-shooting?

My Students, My Teachers

GEORGE SEIDENBECKER
EVANSTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

One October day in 1973 I asked my students if any of them had done creative writing on their own (I had assigned only exposition) and, if they had, whether they would give it to me so I could submit it to the state contest sponsored by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English. In response to that rather crude call for manuscripts, four students in my sophomore honors English classes brought me stories.

I was amazed. The writing of two of the narratives was clearly superior. The stories were unified, detailed and organized with a complexity of symbolism and irony. Without my direction the authors of these works had produced more sophisticated writing than they had produced for my expository assignments in literary analysis. One of these two pieces was awarded honorable mention and the other was published in the Late Spring issue of *The Illinois English Bulletin*. Ever since that experience, I have been the student, learning from the imaginative prose of young people and searching for techniques to help them produce it.

Since 1973 I have used, with various levels, but especially with my sophomore honors sections, a number of prewriting, writing, and post-writing techniques to help my students write imaginative prose. I explain to them that by this I mean prose whose content is all imagined or imagined in some part, as one must when describing detailed autobiographical incidents.

It has seemed to me that many composition texts overemphasize organization, grammatical correctness, or other aspects of form and underemphasize the importance of the topic and of the audience. Consequently for the last ten years I have not used composition texts in teaching narration, description, or in teaching the writing of auto-

biographical or biographical incidents nor have I usually weighted mechanical correctness much in evaluating these types of assignments. Instead I have attempted to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to share their ideas and experiences openly with their classmates and with me. At the same time I try to instill in my students—especially through the use of models and a system of grading—the sense that I expect a lot from them in all aspects of my course including imaginative prose writing. Some of the ways that I attempt to create this open yet challenging atmosphere I shall call prewriting.

The prewriting technique that I have used earliest in the semester is name memorization. Sometime during the first few class meetings I ask the students to memorize their classmates' names, usually by doing so first in small groups, then in larger ones, until the whole class is in one large circle. This takes about a forty-five minute period, and I hope that it helps students feel more at ease in class and that it is a first step in developing for future assignments an audience that the student knows and cares about. I have also photographed students to establish a sense of individual and group identity and to promote a sense of audience. I have also made a list of student birthdays and have posted birthday pictures taken with my Polaroid.

I have used other techniques, also, to encourage students to be at ease. These include class sharing of puns—an activity which creates informality through húmor; conducting open discussions, modeled after those advocated by William Glassner in *Schools Without Failure*; arranging group activities for paper reading and work projects; showing slides to develop class sensitivity to characterizing detail; and asking for impressionistic writing to be done while listening to a recording of light classical music.

Besides using these general prewriting warmups, I have used techniques to stimulate a more specific preparation for imaginative prose writing. The first of these is brainstorming, during which I systematically withhold critical judgment while students search for topics. As suggestions are made, I write them on the blackboard or a student copies them on a ditto master for later distribution. I have also asked students to brainstorm individually for a written list of five composition topics to contribute to a class listing. When students see their topics on a ditto or see that it is permissible to write on just about anything, they may become more comfortable sharing writing about their experiences or ideas.

The second of these prewriting warm-ups is freewriting, sometimes called stream-of-consciousness writing or forced writing or automatic writing. [The term is explained at length by Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*.] I ask students to write for ten minutes without

stopping and without attending to any proofreading concerns like grammar, punctuation, spelling, or diction or even to organization or unity. My intention is to encourage students to explore the flow of their ideas which they may later develop further in more structured writing. Though I usually do not read my students' freewritings, I have seen two touching examples that stood by themselves as written. In one a student, who blocked and simply couldn't write a more formal composition, wrote a perceptive analysis of how the position of her brothers' Christmas stockings over the fireplace revealed their characters. In the second, another girl wrote about her anger at finding out that her grandfather had cancer and about her love for him:

> Life: love and death. I suppose it's the life cycle. I just realized that my grandfather has cancer. He had a little nodule on his voice box that he got surgically removed. It was self-contained cancer. Carcinoma. Another surgery was performed to check everything out. Now while he's recuperating the pathologist's report found that he has some other cells growing adjacent to the spot of the last one. I thought they had gotten all of it before!
>
> He's eighty-three _____ years old and he can't be sick now. Not now. I can't think of him as dying—he's only sick, he's only sick. He's only sick and needs radiation. That's more than sick.
>
> I can't let him leave me. I suppose that sounds very selfish, but he can't leave because he doesn't yet know how much I love him.
>
> It'll take a few good cry sessions.
>
> I'm worried though.
>
> Funny how this has already brought some of our family closer together. You always read about it—hear about it—there's a certain exciting quality about being all of a sudden sucked into your family.

Besides asking students to do freewriting, I have asked them to do a similar type of writing that also emphasizes content. I call this focused writing—focused on either one sense (as Jeffrey Schrank recommends in *Teaching Human Beings: 101 Subversive Activities for the Classroom*) or on words. To prepare for the first type of sense-focused writing, I may ask students to close their eyes and sit quietly for two minutes and to listen carefully for any sound. After this preparation I may ask them to write about what they hear. In the second type of focused writing I may compose a list of six words suggested by a work we are reading—like "leader," "jealousy," and "revenge" when

we read *Julius Caesar*—and I may ask students to write for two minutes about their earliest memory of a specific event suggested by each of the words. In the free and focused writing prewriting warm-ups, I try to get students to write about what's on their minds at the moment—so the subject is really their former or present experience—and I encourage them to write a lot about it during a short time.

Leading to the specific, formal assignment of an autobiographical or biographical incident, I have asked students to submit family trees or to offer two memorized anecdotes about living or dead members of their families. This activity provides them with a subject that is either within their own experiences or that has an imaginative appeal. This material may then serve as the basis for a biographical incident about a family member. I am often surprised at the level of imagined detail in the stories which grow thus from a few facts.

The last prewriting technique that I have used as a warm-up for specific writing assignments is the reading aloud of student models. Regardless of the topic, students seem to find it easy to identify with the one who had written the model. Even high quality prose pieces written by fellow students seem more approachable objects for emulation than the works of professional writers. Such papers seem especially impressive when someone in class knows the author (I usually identify them) or recognizes the event.

For the actual writing of imaginative prose, I have relied largely on just two assignments. For the first I ask students to bring in at least two pages of writing that is fresh, vivid and personal. I explain that by "fresh" I mean original, by "vivid" I mean detailed, and by "personal" I mean revealing a responsive intellect or sensitive emotions. I call this my FVP assignment. I encourage, but do not require, them to write from their own experience because doing so will probably help them write fresh, vivid, and personal pieces; only they have their own (fresh) experience, and using it is the surest way to avoid cliches; they can probably recall (or imagine) the vivid details of something that happened to them; they probably best know and care about what has actually happened to them and it's probably easier to convey this pre-existing knowledge or concern than it is to produce it in response to some imagined topic.

When I have asked students to write these FVP papers, as I call them, I have done so as often as once a week for two semesters and as seldom as once every three weeks for only one quarter. Occasionally a student does a remarkable job developing some passing idea simply because he had an assignment soon due. To produce reasonably good work on this assignment, my students don't seem to need more preparation than a brainstorming session, a free writing exercise, a few models, and a practice run that they share with classmates.

The forms FVP papers usually take are descriptions, short narratives, and reflections. One written by a boy this year contained his thoughts on how wasteful of paper his girlfriend is in sending so many notes to her friends (because she is typical, he had visions of the need for odd-even day paper rationing); another recent piece was written by a self-proclaimed female chauvinist pig who, because she is often a spectator at her brother's track meets, develops an interest in the masculine leg; and a third was written about one girl's uncontrollable urge to touch, usually at sweater counters in department stores, anything soft. Her opening leads her reader to her subject:

> I entered. Past the makeup counters with their gooey, repulsive, mashed, dirty testers; past a woman giving free sprays of an odor which smelled like dead roses; past an old saleswoman trying to look young and chic, but not fooling anyone in her tight pants, silk blouse, and face like Merle Normann had tried too hard; past the section titled "For the Independent Woman," which appeared as if the clothes designer thought every independent woman should be wearing gold and black sparkly clothes in exotic cuts, much like Halloween costumes; past a table labelled "New Fads," featuring shawls of sea blue-green, orangy-red, and hot pink, among other dashing colors and boots which looked conspicuously like Mork's from Ork, I walked.
>
> Finally I saw them, practically the *only* reason I entered clothing stores anywhere. As I walked toward them, passion began to grow in my heart. I longed for them hungrily. Scrumptious pinks, rich burgundys, luscious blues, delicious greys, and yummy yellows engulfed my line of vision. I could see their intense softness and I licked my lips. There they were, all folded delicately in neat, plexiglass cubbyholes—cashmere sweaters.

I suspect that, with perhaps some dramatic license, the preoccupations of these three authors were accurately reflected in their works, and I like the openness of the FVP assignment because it allows students to do this: to tell what is on their minds. A good imaginative prose assignment, it seems to me, allows, even encourages, a student to express actual experience, to project imaginatively, or both. It seems to me that the FVP assignment often does this.

For a second writing assignment for imaginative prose, I ask students to write a three-to-five page autobiographical or biographical incident involving a member of their family, living or dead. The incident is to have both external and internal conflict and to develop one or more dramatic scenes. The prewriting activities useful for this

assignment are the family tree, the memorized family anecdotes, and the writing exercise which focused on words.

One of my students won publication for a story which came from an imaginative filling in of details for a family anecdote. She based "Lock, Stock, and Barrel" on a story kernel about her great grandmother, who came as a teenager from Tennessee to start a primitive homestead at Stones River with a bridegroom selected by her parents. The story begins:

> I had always tried to be an obedient and respectful daughter. I had tried to listen patiently to Mama when she carried on about women's work and how a good wife must sew, cook, clean, furnish a home, and rear children, but it all seemed so useless. I took it for granted that when I married, and I knew that someday far removed from my present sixteen year old days I would marry, just as my sisters before me, I would lead the same life my mother did, complete with a lady's maid, a cook, someone to help with the housekeeping, a nanny, and handfuls of other darkies to tend the fields.
>
> I tried to listen to Pap, too, Mr. Roger Quarles, as he lectured on obedience in his household and especially in his youngest daughter. But when he told me I was to marry Mr. Smith Pruitt, I burst into tears of anger and helplessness. I should have seen it coming, for Mr. Pruitt had been a frequent guest this past year, sharing the sabbath meal when all the family would unite to pray and dine together. Yet Mr. Pruitt never looked at me as other young men did. In fact, he only addressed me with greetings or to comment on the meal as one might to the daughter of a close friend. And after the meal, Papa, Brother Roger, and he would retire into the study to discuss whatever men discussed in studies after dinner. Besides, Mr. Pruitt was so old, almost twice my age. And I wasn't ready for marriage yet.

Besides realizing the story in persuasive detail, Patricia depicts her heroine's change from a pampered and dependent youngest daughter to a self-reliant pioneer woman.

Of the postwriting activities, assigning a letter grade like A or B seems to be the least important. Of the six student prose pieces published in *The Illinois English Bulletin*, only one was written for an assignment that was graded in such a way. This was the autobiographical or biographical incident, which I grade, using as criteria whether or not conflicts are developed and scenes are dramatized. On this assignment, in an honors section composed of students from

approximately the top thirty percent of their class, I gave about fifteen percent A's, about fifteen percent C's and below, and the rest B's. Students had done four FVP papers before this assignment, so these percentages of grades were for a practiced effort. As an alternative to grading on the FVP papers, I mark the number of pages and assign the letters F, V, and P: F if I found the piece fresh and original; V if I found it vivid and detailed; P if I found it personal, if I found an intelligent or sensitive person responding to the material. I encourage students to work for all three. Most students earn one letter on the first two FVP assignments and two letters thereafter.

Perhaps the most important postwriting activities are those that provide a student with an audience of classmates. When a student hears or reads papers by other students, he probably gets ideas about subjects and methods of development for his own future compositions, and this postwriting activity therefore becomes, I suspect, an important prewriting activity.

To provide an audience I have used in honors and in regular classes (1) row-groups, (2) Elbow-groups, and (3) the whole class as a group. For a row-group, I have used the four, five, or six students in a row to share their imaginative prose compositions with each other; they usually do this by reading their own papers to the group but they exchange papers and read them silently.

An Elbow-group derives its name from Peter Elbow who recommends a format for sharing compositions in Chapter Four of *Writing Without Teachers*, "The Teacherless Writing Class." He recommends that a group of seven to twelve writers use a series of steps to read their papers twice and to respond to details and to conscious and unconscious messages in the written work. These steps include pointing to effective words and phrases, summarizing the main points, telling what happened in you as you read the work, and "showing" an associational or metaphoric response (naming a musical instrument, for example) to convey some perception that cannot be otherwise articulated. I have tried systematically to implement Elbow-groups in my class, and, though students get a lot out of the method, it seemed to me that my sophomores were either not mature enough nor dedicated enough to realize the full potential of the technique. For the most part, my students' writings tend to be anecdotal, and the interest they take in each other's works is as much in gossip or story swapping as it is in literary analysis.

I have also used the entire class as an audience for papers. Often I read effective papers to the class. Students receive these well, sometimes making suggestions for improvement, and they are usually eager to learn the author's identity. I have also asked students to select and to type one FVP paper to share with the class. I then have

made a transparency of it and have projected it for the class to read and to respond to.

Because so much of my material for the prewriting, writing, and postwriting stages comes from my students, I think I am justified not only in viewing myself as their teacher, but also in viewing many of them as my teachers, for every time a student succeeds in writing a fresh, vivid, and personal paper regardless of the assignment I learn something.

Whose Prose Is It, Anyway?

JOHN REQUE
EVANSTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

If you want to know about teaching writing, ask a writer. So I questioned a dozen of them, former students of mine who make a living at writing now. Here is what they said, and here is what I think of what they said.

1. *The teachers that I considered the hardest while in school probably taught me the most.*

Marice Richter, newspaper reporter

We demand quality by reacting with precision and interest to what students write. Yes, the student's own language is his; but when it's turned in to me I tell him what I think. We're in writing class to learn and to improve, not to polish our social relationships.

2. *The only way to learn to write is to write a lot, experiment with different styles, work with good tough editors, and combine these with a reasonable dose of talent.*

Deborah Abbott, speechwriter

Teachers and editors do the same thing. Editors get more credit for it, I guess. They give assignments, ask for rewrites, tighten language. And they recognize talent. You can't create talent; you can only spot it, draw it out, shine it up.

3. *I have the impression that I received a lot of encouragement and attention for my writing, and that certainly never harmed a beginning writer.*

James Atlas, magazine editor

Encouragement and attention aren't simply praise. They announce talent loudly. Some students don't really know how good they are. Then they require more hard work to develop that talent. Yes, you're

good, now this is what you need to do. The A paper needs more comments on it than the D paper.

4. *My sophomore English teacher assigned the members of my class the task of writing something daily. The practice was invaluable.*
Tonna Gibert, book editor

Teaching writing wears you down. Return papers the next day or they won't mean anything. It's an 80-hour week. Last semester I read 1,200 essays of 500 words each plus another 1,200 shorter assignments. If you don't want to do that, teach literature. If you want to teach writing, it pays off.

5. *I was fortunate in having teachers who made certain we mastered a technique before moving on to something else.*
Robin Phillips, television reporter

Drill bores teachers as much as it does students. Any teacher faces that, but those who really confront it, clause by clause, do their writing students a permanent service: a foundation of fundamentals.

6. *My most helpful writing tool was a senior English course that emphasized grammar and structure for expository writing.*
Vera Paktor, public relations consultant

Close your door and teach. Of course today's students don't know their grammar; we didn't know it in the 40's either. We all need chronic correction. I still split infinitives and dangle modifiers now and then, but I've got the basics within me to correct them myself.

7. *Though intimidation may be counter-productive in some cases, often it is this deference that motivates the student to work harder at his writing—and at everything else.*
Robert Neiman, television production

We intimidate students partly because we work harder than they do, and they know it. Writing is lonely, uncomfortable. So is teaching it. To care that much about what the student writes may scare him a little—it's not easy to be taken seriously about what you put on paper.

8. *People who like to write are people who like to read, so the library was a haven for me. A few teachers got me interested enough in their subjects so that I struggled to do my best and express myself well.*
Edward Epstein, newspaper editor

The student picks up the teacher's enthusiasm. But teachers express it in different ways. It's the idea of the model: we imitate those we admire. We see them read and write; we do the same.

9. *I learned to write by reading, at home, long before I arrived at ETHS. But a number of teachers reinforced my confidence as a writer.*

Seth Masia, magazine editor

The home gets there first, for better or worse. Teachers are middlemen. We don't originate growth or finish it. We're in between somewhere.

10. *My English courses were helpful in the sense of allowing a block of time specifically set aside for writing assignments. Otherwise, I never would have had time for practicing the craft and thought processes involved in writing.*

Meridee Merzer, freelance writer

Teachers don't create time, but they fill it. We give writers a psychological shape, a form in which to perform. That seems too simple to appreciate, yet it is remembered.

11. *I remember that the first interview I did—with Jack Albertson—was published in the school newspaper. Since a good deal of my subsequent work has involved interviewing, I can certainly point to that as a key incident in my life.*

Jeffrey Sweet, playwright, journalist

Besides form, teachers give space. Nothing exhilarates like publication. When writing sees print, motivation overflows. The beginning writer will glow from any form of publication; teachers must provide that.

12. *I really trust the criticism and encouragement of only about seven people in my life. These are the people for whom I write; they are my audience. But in a more general sense I don't think you write for the reader. You write hoping that you're contributing to the great mass of words that have come through the ages.*

Alan Gross, playwright, journalist

The writing teacher wants to be among those seven, not literally but in spirit. Teachers fade as writers bloom, for they have absorbed us. Our discipline by then is really theirs.

Finally, let me quote myself.

> *The results of our work as high school teachers can be evaluated only by knowing what becomes of our students.*

To best teach writing, we must identify talent, encourage it, make demands on it. Writing is an art—beyond teaching. But writing is also a craft, and to that we can add our bit.